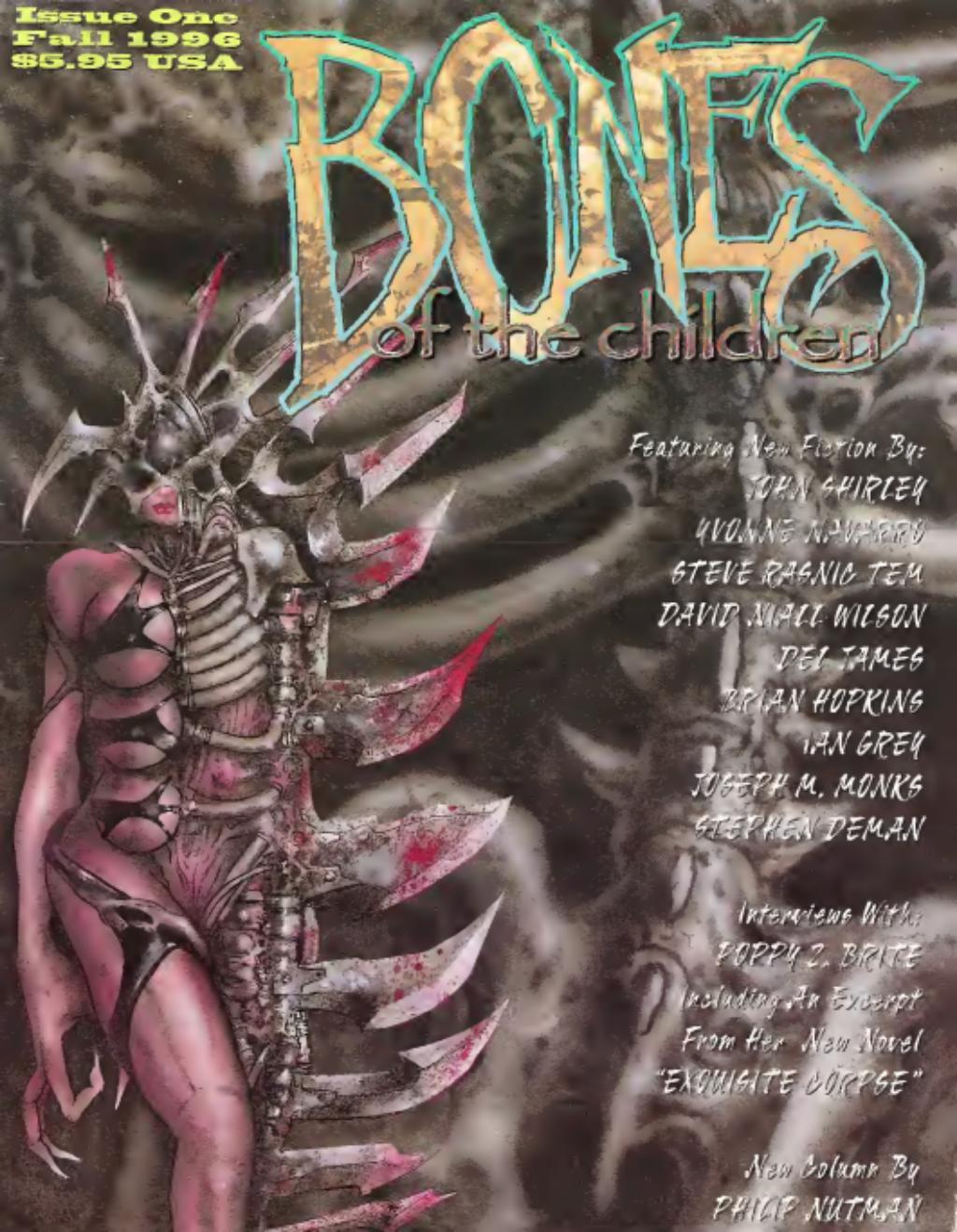


Issue One  
Fall 1996  
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# BONES

of the children



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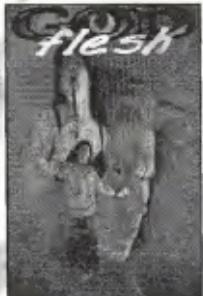
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Editor  
Paula Guran

**Associate Fiction Editors**

Brian Hopkins  
Christian Muncy  
David Niall Wilson

**Cover and Special Art**  
Frank Forte

**Featured Art by Visage Studios**  
Rich Buckler, Sr., John Orlando,  
Rich Buckler, Jr. and Vern McDade

**Other Featured Artists**  
Chad Savage and Kevin Kuder

**Photos of Ms. Brite:**  
Christopher DeBarr

**Published by**  
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Paula Guran  
PO Box 5410, Akron OH 44334  
Email: bonesmail@aol.com

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# BARE BONES

## *from the editor*

Welcome to BONES, a magazine of cutting edge dark fiction.

Don't tell me there is no such thing as "dark fiction," that it is too vague or broad a label. All labels are vague and broad. This one is used to convey a type of literature that delves into our fears, souls, intellect and imagination and confronts the darkness that is within us all and within our reality. Horror, yes, but not always as traditionally defined.

As for "cutting edge" -- of course, there is no definition. But, much of what is, or can be, or might be was inadvertently, individually and independently defined by some of the articles for this issue. Phil Nutman quotes Douglas Winter: Horror is an emotion, not a genre. He also refers to defining the Light by exploring Darkness. . . Ian Grey explains that once conventional horror served as a shared mass catharsis but, in the context of the consensus reality of our time, we have new horrors to confront us. . . the music of this darkness, according to John Everson, is seductive, addictive and serves up our blackest communal dreams. . . Poppy Z. Brite discusses how the traditional dichotomy of good and evil has outlived some of its usefulness in horror. Alex Johnson writes about seeking pleasure in writing that twists and disturbs us; that re-envisioning the world; that cuts to the heart of fear and finds the monsters -- sometimes within ourselves.

Cutting edge doesn't play it safe. It slices. It is also contradictory and rebellious, so any "rule" established is likely to be broken.

There is a lot of sex, drugs and violence in this first issue, but that doesn't necessarily mean that's what BONES is about. It will take some time to discover that. All of you reading this can give us that time by subscribing, advertising, helping find distribution and supporting our expedition.

Like any birth, this has been a bloody and painful one at times. I have a lot of people to thank for helping me bring this baby into the world. (I am sure I will forget someone and suffer much guilt because of it, mothers are like that. If you've been there for me -- thanks.) First and foremost, thanks to my family who have come to understand being ignored too often, but still being loved. . . to those like Andre Scheluchin, Mark Rainey, Dave Wilson, John Platt, Brian Hopkins and John Rosenman who have been here before and tried to tell me this was insane. . . to John Shirley for predicting it would happen and reminding me nothing worthwhile is easy. . . to Christian Muncy for reminding me what is, indeed, worthwhile. . . to my "sister" Marie Robinson for being confident and to Yvonne Navarro for kicking my butt on occasion. . . to Michele Patterson, Blackwood and the darklings of the DF/Horror Workshop for their support and all that they have given me the last two years. . . to Joe Monks for having the vision to publish this. . . to the horror writing community as a whole who took me in, accepted me, taught me and has yet to tell me I am not one of them.

It's been a learning experience. I've learned I know next to nothing, but -- with your help -- I intend to keep on learning and hope BONES is a reflection of any knowledge gained. Email me at [bonesmail@aol.com](mailto:bonesmail@aol.com) or snail to PO Box 5410, Akron OH 44334 to aid in setting my curriculum.

Paula Guran, *Editor*

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8:45 P.M., Saturday Night, West Oakland, California

Dwayne was sick of hearing Uncle Garland talk. The old man would talk about Essy and he would talk about the dope and he would talk about grindin', about everything but his own goddamn drinking. Sitting in that busted wheelchair at the kitchen table, talking and sipping that Early Times. Talking shit about his angel dreams, too. One more word about the dope. . .

But Dwayne tolerated more than just one more word, because he needed Uncle Garland. He needed a place to stay and some place to run to. So he just sat and listened while he waited for Essy to get up, waited for Essy to get them started again. Essy in the next room, had to crash for awhile, been two hours already. Fuck it. Dwayne could taste rock at the back of his tongue; smell it high in his nostrils. All in the imagination.

The TV was on, with the sound turned off. A rerun of a show with that guy used to be in *Taxi*. Tony something.

"You listening to me, Dwayne?" Uncle Garland demanded, scratching his bald pate with yellowed fingers. His rheumy eyes looking at Dwayne and not seeing him. Moving with less life than the TV screen. Blind. The old man was blind, but that was easy to forget, somehow.

"Can't hardly not listen, you talking all the time," Dwayne said.

"The dope killing this town, it be killing our people," Garland was saying. "Killing the black man. I'm fixin' to go the Next World, and I'm glad to be goin', Praise Jesus, with the devil eating this world like a pie. . ." Didn't pause to take a breath.

Uncle Garland's place was an apartment in the Projects, in the shadow of the freeway that collapsed in the '89 earthquake. Used to be you heard the freeway boooming and rushing all night. Now it was eerie quiet. Or quiet as it ever got in the Projects.

"Tell you some true now," Uncle Garland said, using the expression that always prefaced a long, long lecture. "These are the end times, that the Lord's truth. In my angel dreams, they come to me and tell me it's so. And it's on the news, about the dead people rising. It's in the Bible, son, when the dead rise it's a Sign that the Lord is coming for Judgment —"

"You see that shit in the *Weekly World News* or the *Star*?"

"Radio news, I heard it. A disease in the air, they said, a radiation. The dead rising and hungry for the flesh of the living, Lord, and they —"

"That's complete shit," Dwayne snorted. Why didn't fucking Essy get up? Maybe he wouldn't help him,

get him started on the rock today. Cousin Essy think he's a big Grinder now, selling dope, stylin' like a B Boy, but he got nothing to show for it. Not like he paying the rent here. Some grinders they put their family in a nice house, buy them cars. Essy don't give the old man shit, so don't tell me you're the big Fly. Of course, the old man wouldn't accept the money, he'd know it was dope money...

"Tisn't radiation," the old man said, sucking on the pint bottle, "It's the dark wave, the night wave that sweeps over things, son. It changing the world, readying for the end times. People, they do evil to each other and it opens the door for more evil. Evil deeds call up evil spirit and its hunger enters the dead, it's a sickness on the land..."

Dwayne couldn't stand it anymore. Fuck Essy. He'd get his materials, one way or another.

He stood up abruptly and headed for the door. Put his hand on the knob. Said, over his shoulder, "Uncle you tell Essy I got tired of waiting. I going to —"

"No p'int in telling Essy shit. He dead."

Dwayne felt a cold wave, like that wave of darkness the old man gabbled about, ripping through his gut. "Bullshit."

"I feel it. He died, maybe an hour ago. Got some p'ison in him."

"Shit," Dwayne said again, and opened the door. He wasn't going to go in and check on Essy. Wake him up when he's crashing, he'd go off on you. Anyway the old man was full of shit.

But as he walked down the hallway he felt like Essy was dead, too.

In the kitchen, Garland sat up straighter on his wheelchair: he heard Essy stirring. Heard the creak of the bedsprings. Garland had been blind so long he scarcely noticed the darkness anymore. But now, it seemed to take on density and weight; his blindness seemed to thicken about him and chill him like a cloud covering the sun.

Heard the shuffling steps coming. Knew for certain what it was. The dream angels had left him in no doubt.

He reached out, found his cane, forced himself to his feet. He rarely stood anymore, but this time the danger

of it, of fracturing one of his porous old bones, didn't matter. He crossed to the broom closet by the old, whirring refrigerator. Moving only a little more slowly than the footsteps coming up behind him from the next room. He felt for the knob, found it, pulled the closet open. Found the old pistol where he kept it under the oily rags on the top shelf and drew it out, his hands shaking.

Then thought: What if the dark wave brings me back too?

It wouldn't be Garland, not really him, but . . .

He heard a dream angel whisper: Not you, nor your old body.

He heard the shuffling nearer. Heard no breathing with it. No breathing, not any.

He raised the gun. Raised it to his mouth, pressed the barrel up against the palate, pulled the trigger.

His last thought was: Leaving a kind of gift for it. Light.

9:57 P.M., Downtown Oakland

Dwayne knew. He knew even before the white guy got out of his car. You could see it by the way he drove up, the car moving almost spastically, and the way he parked, the sedan slung across two parking spaces outside the liquor store, and the way his head moved around like one of those little dashboard dolls that's got a head wobbling on a spring. The white guy was fucked up, really fucked up, and probably on base. Crack cocaine.

He was opportunity on the hoof.

The white guy had longish red-brown hair, bright blue eyes, and a little reddish mustache. He was driving a tan Acura, maybe a '95, and he had a gold watch on his right wrist. This was looking better and better.

Hobey saw him too. But Hobey was across the parking lot, trotting up real slow. Hobey was too old, too fat. Didn't smoke, drank Night Train instead. Sold the rock sometimes, but never used, and acted like he was ruff because of it.

Dwayne was leaning into the white guy's passenger side window by the time Hobey got there. "Whus'up," Dwayne said, "What you need, tell me, I belp."

The white guy's mouth was hanging open a little. His eyes dilating, shrinking, dilating, shrinking. A tongue so dry you could almost hear the rasp of it as he licked his lips. Word: it was base.

"Rock," the guy said. "Crack," Things white guys called base cocaine.

"How much?"

"Uh — sixty bucks worth."

Man, he was fucked up. Not supposed to make a deal that way, people rip you off. They sure do.

Dwayne almost laughed. But he said, "Okay, I take you there."

"Get in."

Hobey was coming around to the guy's driver side, "What you need, chief? I get it for you, I find the best—"

"I got it," Dwayne snapped. "I taking care of it." He gestured briskly to the white guy. "Hobey's a rip-off artist. He gafflin' people all the time. Let's go."

The guy changed gears like a robot and they backed out, nearly plowing into the brick wall on the other side of the lot. Then they were careening down the street, Dwayne hissing, "Yo, chill this thing down, man, you get the cops on us."

The white guy slowed down to a crawl.



This part of San Pablo Avenue was mostly liquor stores; flyblown bars with the light bulbs burnt out in their signs; adult video stores where fag hustlers cruised the video galleries. Dwayne had worked the video stores doing the tease thing, as Essy called it. Pretending you were a fag, going into the booth with a real fag. He puts some tokens in the machine, some fag video comes on, he's watching it and you're kind of messing around with his dick with one hand, distracting him, making a lot of noise about it, then lifting his wallet, going through his pockets while his pants are down. Then you say "Oh shit — I think somebody's coming, they checkin' the booths," and you split. It takes them a minute to discover they are ripped off and —

"There it is," Dwayne said, now. "That hotel."

It was an old white wedge of a building, tall and narrow, on a sort of island where three streets almost intersected. The rest of the block was abandoned office space, rickety buildings from the early part of the twentieth century. Doc was standing in the doorway of the hotel, all in white as usual. A white suit, with a pink carnation. His black Jag was parked just a few feet from him where he could keep an eye on it.

"Thas the dude," Dwayne said. "Got him a Jaguar XKE, doing this shit." Dwayne couldn't keep the admiration out of his voice. That Doc had it together.

"Pull up over there," Dwayne said. "No, fuck, don't — shit!"

The guy cut across two lanes with a screeching right angle turn.

"Shit!" Dwayne looked around as the guy parked. No cops. Looked out again.

"What's your name?" the white guy asked.

"Dwayne."

"I'm Jim. Okay . . . uh . . ." He looked through the window at Doc. Knew he couldn't go over and buy the shit himself. Or thought he couldn't, anyway. Probably could have. Probably didn't need Dwayne.

But Dwayne was hankering on Jim White Guy not knowing that. And, in fact, Dwayne could feel he was going to connect good here. Fuck Essy. Dwayne could grind his own business. Essy could come asking Dwayne for a start. (No way Essy was dead, that old man was getting brain damaged from drinking . . . Drinking kill you . . .)

Jim went on, "What you want for this?"

Dwayne said, "A dove."

"Half a dove."

So he knew what a dove was anyway. A forty dollar rock of crack.

"Whatever you wanna do, hey homes, it's okay. I'm not one of these gaflers like Hobey —"

"Yeah, yeah." The guy was getting a weary look as he took a chip of rock out from a jar, broke it in half in his teeth, put one of the halves in a pipe . . . Shit, the pipe was a *pipe*. It was a motherfucking *brix* pipe. Lighting it with a Bic. Sucking at it.

Dwayne felt his scalp contract, his mouth go dry as he watched. Smelled the oily perfume and insecticide tang of the smoke. "You oughta get yourself a stem, man. What kind of fucking pipe is that?"

"Only one they had left in the store. I'll get a stem later. Here's sixty. Don't cruise on me, you'll be fucking up a good thing." The guy was involuntarily grinning as he said it.

"Gimme a blast," Dwayne said. The guy handed over the pipe and the Bic. Dwayne took a hit. The pipe worked shitty, but good enough for now, except it burnt his fingers having to hold the Bic upside down over the howl. The blast feeling blossomed in him. It rushed through him and instantly he began to work on ways to get more. This guy, no telling how much money he had. Probably had a bank card. Maybe — "Go on," Jim said, taking the pipe back.

Dwayne folded the sixty hucks into his palm.

"Keep that pipe low, watch for cops." Still shaking a little from the blast, he got out and crossed to Doc, thinking: Play this guy carefully.

*Saturday Night, 10:50 P.M.*

**There were headlines on the metro section that said: THREE MORE CRACK DEATHS Coroner Doubts OD Cause.**

Hobey almost went to sleep on the bus. Last time he did that he slept past his stop, took him half the night to get home. He was tired and when he was tired he noticed the creakiness in his bones more. Fuck that damn little nigger, that Dwayne, he be stepping in every time something should be Hobey's coming down . . . Someone had left an *Oakland Tribune* on a seat. There were headlines on the metro section that said: THREE MORE CRACK DEATHS *Coroner Doubts OD Cause*.

"Huh," Hobey said. Some had shit going around. That kind of shit, that's why he didn't smoke. Shit like that.

The night sky was jet black, looking starless over the glaring anti-crime lights on Martin Luther King, Jr. Way when Hobey got off the last bus.

He turned down Winston street. There was action over to the parking lot of the 7-11, but Hobey didn't care, he was too tired to fuck with trying to get in on it. Some of those piped-up motherfuckers shoot you. Uzi your guts out soon as look at you. Don't be fucking with it when you're weary.

He stalked past a dirt lot where an old crackerbox house was almost demolished. Hobey used to work in demolition, before he got kicked out of the union, and this mess made him shake his head. The demolition had been subcontracted to some damn non-union crew! Just went

after it with crowbars and a rented plow. It looked like a tornado had flattened the house at random, a scattered pile of plasterboard and timbers like a crazy snail shell for the slug of a rotten old mattress left in the house during demolition . . .

Hobey stopped and stared.

The mattress had moved. Had humped up, a little. By itself. Humping up so there was a dark little cave under it. Fringe of wet, mildewed mattress stuffing hanging down over the mattress cave. Like a gooey wig over the face that was coming into the light, showing, now, in the little cave. Something crawling out . . .

Just some homeless nigger, Hobey thought.

So why was he scared to look at it? Why did he feel, at the same time, scared to look away from it?

The fella was about forty feet away, coming out on his hands and knees. All raggedy. Looked beat up, like he'd been tossed in there and stuff dumped on him. Maybe that mattress got dragged from somewhere else to cover him. The man ditched because they thought he was dead, most likely. Hobey had seen it before. Somebody ODs, the rockhouse doesn't want the body around so they drag it to the nearest river or vacant lot, dump it, cover it up, let the hogs chew it up so nobody knows who it is . . .

Only they thought this guy was dead and he wasn't.

Should stay out of this. But he was feeling kind of low about himself, felt like doing for somebody, give him a lift. This man was lower down than he was . . . Must be getting old.

"You need some help, man. You lookin' poorly," Hobey said, picking his way through the debris toward the man. Didn't recognize him. Black man, maybe was a teenager, not much older. Not standing up straight yet, hunched over. Something hanging off his head, maybe mattress stuff . . .

Ten feet away. Hobey stopped. The man took a shaky step, bringing him into a streak of streetlight shine. Lifting his face toward Hobey.

He had eye sockets full of ants.

His eyes were gone. Ants, instead. Ants in the empty sockets, the ants moving all squiggling and searching the way ants do. Seeking and chewing, shiny and restless. No eyes. Ants.

"My Lord, man . . ." Hobey breathed. "What they done to you . . ."

Then he saw the spike. Big rusty metal spike from some concrete support of the house. Bent and blunt. Right through the man's chest.

Right through the motherfucker's heart.

something, he go out on a hinge. Dwayne thought. Not used to it, puts him farther out of his head. He's righteous tweakin'.

Dwayne watched Jim White Guy crossing the street. Walking to the bank machine. A little island of light in the dim street: a little high tech sweetness in the concrete and fake marble.

Leaving the keys in the car. Leaving the keys with Dwayne. A complete stranger.

Got to be tweaked to do that.

Now Jim White Guy was standing at the machine, swaying, twitching a little, trying to figure out the hiccups in that state. Probably end up leaving his card in the machine. Better check. When Jim Pale come back, they going to need that card. They'd already burned through the dove, and another one, and the guy was making his second run to the hank machine, and he'd left the keys in his Acura, and . . .

The high was buzzing in Dwayne, but the buzz was fading. Time for another hit. He lit up some of the haze he'd palmed when Jim White Guy wasn't looking, sucked it up in the stem, the glass pipe he'd picked up on Telegraph Avenue.

*There. There it is.* Spreading out in him, expanding through his nervous system. The blast. The rush spreading its wings. Wings made of flash-paper on fire. Going up, gone.

Blasts were getting shorter, weaker. Need bigger hits.

Maybe some black tar to go with it, ease the landing.

Maybe take the car now.

But then Jim White Guy was back, sliding in. "I got some money for that pussy, too," the guy said. Thinking he was real street smart talking about pussy that way.

They made a stop at Doc's dope house, Dwayne breaking some of the dove off with a thumbnail, sliding it into his change pocket while he was walking around behind the Acura. Then Dwayne said, "Okay. Left at the corner. If you want ho's."

It was coming together in Dwayne's head. He knew a whore, Joleen, used an empty building up on Martin Luther King and Winston. That the opportunity.

They found Joleen easy. She was a floppily titted hitch with skinny legs, not getting much work, walking up and down the sidewalk in front of the condemned house. Across the street from the demolition lot where Samson Ramirez had dumped that OD case out of his rockhouse. Joleen, clutching a fake patent leather purse, was moving back and forth like a wind-up toy, marching on broken-down white Adidas gone gray from the street.

Jim White Guy was so high anything with tits looked good to him. Two minutes, and Dwayne had him out of his car, across the sidewalk, making a quick deal for Joleen. Acting like Joleen was going to do them both.

*Saturday Night, 10:55 P.M.*

White guy on a hinge, that's what he was, Didn't smoke most days, but tonight he got mad at his wife or

Joleen was cheap. Didn't work out of a house or a motel or anything, she couldn't handle the overhead. Bitch just do it right there in your car or wherever was handy. Forty dollars for two. Another time, if he was trying to get some pussy from a toss up, he'd trade some smoke for it. But now he didn't want to waste time in negotiations.

"I got a place back here," Joleen said, leading them up a walkway used for storing garbage cans. The side door had been knocked off its hinges long ago. They stepped through it, went down a stairs, into a furnace room. There was a pile of dirty blankets in the corner; gray light coming through a grimy window from the street.

"Shit," Jim White Guy said, whirling on Dwayne. "You setting me up to rob me? I got some friends, I'll fucking have you killed — anything happens to me, they —"

"Yo, chill out, we here for some pussy. Look, I got my dick out. I usin' my dick to rob you?" Dwayne pulled out his dick, wagged it at Joleen, who dutifully went to her knees. Started sucking. Wouldn't be able to get it hard, after all the base. Not Jim White Guy's dick either. But the man was too piped-up to care.

"I'll take her from behind while she does you," Jim White Guy said. But what he was doing was firing up his pipe.

"All right, I hear you!" Dwayne said, and slapped Jim's side in a companionable way; taking the Acura's car keys from Jim White Guy's jacket pocket as the white guy got his blast.

"Suck the man's dick, Joleen, he payin' for this shit," Dwayne said.

Joleen silently shifted over to the white guy, unzipping his pants, taking his pasty, shriveled thing out in her hands.

"You gonna give me a blast, honey?" she said, playing with his dick.

The guy took out the pipe, put it in her mouth, flicked the Bic onto the glass bowl. Not noticing Dwayne moving off behind him.

"Got to pee," Dwayne muttered.

Then he slipped out the door, out to the car. With luck, the white guy be distracted for a few minutes, long enough for Dwayne to get away with the Acura.

And it worked okay, as far as it went.



Tuesday, 2:05 P.M., Fremont, California

"Are you?" she said. Her tone matched her expression. Brittle.

"Yeah," Jim Diggins said, "I am. I'm sure." Feeling like it was the truth. He was sure he'd never do cocaine again. How could he do cocaine again after all this? (But, yeah, he'd said the same thing before the last binge. . . .)

She was angrily taking clothes out of the dryer, putting them directly into her suitcase, hardly bothering to fold them. Jim wouldn't have thought that you could take clothes out of a dryer angrily, but Patty could do anything angrily he'd discovered. She could brush her teeth angrily.

"You're passive-aggressive, you know," she was saying. "This is just another way to express hostility. Getting stoned, getting robbed."

"That's a pretty solipsistic idea of things," Diggins said. Jim Diggins. Jim White Guy. Jim Pale.

He was leaning against the concrete sink next to the washer. A cobweb hung down from one of the old two-by-fours that held up the kitchen floor, feather tickling the back of Diggins' neck. He didn't have the energy to move away from it. He felt like the core had been dug out of him. He might collapse inward, any second. His head fell into his chest. Fold up like the Scarecrow of Oz without straw.

"Jim," his wife was saying, "I heard this crap three times before. You were sure, this time. No more, you said." She was a thin woman, with long straight brown hair hanging to her bony ass. She had violet blue eyes that everyone thought were her best feature. She wore shorts, which maybe her legs were too skinny for. She looked especially pinched and taut when she was angry.

"This time I'll get counseling."

"You got counseling, Jim."

"I mean, therapy, serious therapy. Maybe even Schick Center or something."

"How about a car? Are they going to give you a car at the Schick center?"

"We got insurance."

"We'll still lose money and it'll take a month to get the insurance payoff."

"Look—" He was near tears, crushed by humiliation. "I know I'm a screw-up sometimes but most of the time I work hard for you and Donna . . . ."

"I don't want to hear that speech either." She carried the suitcase out of the laundry room to the stairs.

Ten minutes later she was gone. She'd taken Donna, their four year old and she'd gone, her sister coming all the way from San Jose to pick her up. Jim doubted this was intended to be permanent. It was some kind of . . . therapy. Patty's way of giving him shock treatment. It was like making him stand in a corner. More humiliation. What really hurt was not being able to hold it against her. Who could blame her? He'd had a drug

relapse, and he'd done cocaine again — crack this time, for God's sake. Crack. Which had a nasty street smell about it, the taint of crazies and thieves and whores. And he'd wallowed with all of those — with a thief, with the sleaziest kind of whore (could she have given him AIDS from an unfinished blowjob? could he say for sure she hadn't?), and a crazy. *He* was the crazy. He'd been totally out of his head. A miracle he'd only had his car stolen. Could have been robbed of his credit cards. Could have been murdered. Could have been killed, driving under the influence of the stuff.

That fucker Dwayne.

Jim thought about it as he got himself a Corona and walked through the house from the kitchen, through the dining room and the parlor, to the front room they never used except as a kind of showplace for the furniture Patty'd picked out. His footsteps sounded loud in the house. Lot of creaking boards he'd never noticed before. He could hear water trickling in the sink of the front bathroom where his little girl had left it running, as usual. He couldn't bring himself to turn it off. He crossed to the window, his hand tight on the beer bottle. Looked between the white curtains at the big, wind-blown oaks in the Barton's front yard, across the street. On the ground beneath the trees, tangled shadows of branches and leaves moved like dark seaweed in a translucent ocean.

That fucker Dwayne had seen him coming. Seen a stoned stupid middle class white dumbshit.

He drank half the bottle of beer down all at once. The beer was like running cold water on a burn. For a moment it smoothed over some of the pain. The depression.

"*You knew it was going to make you depressed afterwards,*" Patty had said. "*When you go on one of these stupid binges you always feel like total shit for a week afterwards. How come you don't think about that before you — ?*"

"*I don't know, hell, I don't know,*" he'd said. "*I just get too stressed out or something and it's like somebody throws a switch, I just turn into a fucking drug robot and I go find it. I mean — I've got it down so it only happens once or twice a year now — ?*"

"*Once a decade is too damn much,*" she'd said. Snapping it.

"*I know. I know.*"

"*Christ, don't you think about afterwards at all, Jim?*"

"*All I can think about is how I'm scared to crash. As long as I keep the drug coming I don't think about it . . .*" And he snorted derisively at himself, mumbling, "*It's like skydiving with a busted parachute. It's a great ride till you hit the ground.*"

No sympathy at all from her this time. He couldn't blame her. That came sneering back at him again. Could. Not. Blame her.

For about the five hundredth time since he'd gotten out of the Crisis Ward of the hospital Sunday

afternoon, he thought about killing himself. Get a gun. *Blam.* Brains on the wall. Or maybe use a noose, hang himself. I ought to suffer, he thought,

He thought about killing Dwayne, too.

My car. How dare be touch my car.

The phone rang. He walked in a dream to it. It took an effort of will just to pick it up and say, "Hello?"

"This is the Oakland police department calling for Mr. James Diggins—"

"That's me."

"You reported a stolen car . . ." He read out the license number, the other specs.

"That's my car."

"The car was found by a patrolman yesterday morning. It's been towed to a lot at . . ."

Tuesday, 3:30 P.M.

Why had they taken only three wheels? he wondered numbly.

The Acura was tilted onto its right side wheel rims and the left rear tire. The car's hood was standing open. Dwayne must have gotten spooked or burnt out, Jim decided, after taking three tires. Anything that could easily be detached from the engine was missing. The front seats were missing, too. The trunk bad been cleaned out, tools, tire and jack were missing. The headlights were missing. The radio was gone, pried from the dashboard like a rotten tooth.

And the windshield was smashed out by vandals.

The insurance company would want to have the car repaired. It would be expensive, but still cheaper than a new car. It'd take months. Then he'd get to drive around in this reminder of the night he'd had a nasty fight with Patty, gone out and gotten blown away on coke and fucked up royal. Maybe even got AIDS for all he knew.

He stared at the bulk of his car. Stripped. Picked over like a mollusk after the gulls had been there. A lifeless shell.

Shit. He couldn't believe it. He'd let this happen to the family car. It was a ton or so of pure, raw, undiluted symbol. Sitting on the hardened dirt of a towaway lot.

That fucker Dwayne. It wasn't Dwayne's fault, ultimately, he knew that. It was his own fault. Dwayne was just a drug addict who'd seen an opportunity that Jim Diggins had stupidly dropped in his lap. But, nevertheless, Dwayne had preyed on him. It was like stealing from a blind man. A retarded blind man. Dwayne was raw, undiluted symbol, too.

And Jim wanted to kill him.

Thursday Night, 10:07 P.M., Oakland

A sultry night at Winston Street and Martin Luther King, Jr. Way. Lots of goods going around. Joleen and Bindy, turning toss-up tricks to get their blasts. Dwayne pacing in front of the rockhouse. Thinking: two hundred forty-five dollars. For all that stuff I got out of that Acura. Could have gone to the joint for stealing a car. Five to ten years in prison for two Cs and forty-five fucking dollars. Nobody wanted to buy a hot car. All that risk for a hour's worth of rock . . .

Then here came Samson Ramirez in a new BMW that looked carved out of a single block of snow and ice. So new it didn't have the plates on it, just a sticker in the windshield.

Samson was half white, half Mexican, but he'd been on the street so long Dwayne thought of him as just another homeboy. He was a bard motherfucker, and getting harder as his biz got bigger. He was supposed to be pulling down even more money than Doc now, which was what his white BMW was about, Dwayne figured, to advertise that.

Samson was pulling up in the white BMW, parking across the street and a ways down, not wanting to associate the car too obviously with the rockhouse. He had long, wavy brown hair in a fancy unisex perm, a brown leather jacket and brown leather pants with just a touch of a Latin flare about them. He was small but good looking, with his white Mama's green eyes and his Mexican Daddy's perfect white teeth. Perfect, but he'd had an incisor replaced with a gold tooth, to go with his thick gold chains and maybe just for the flash of wealth in his patronizing smile. They said he didn't do his own product, but some combination of crystal meth and Demerol instead. You could see it in the way he moved, Real fast, but real smooth.

Raiders came out of the rockhouse to meet Samson on the sidewalk. Raiders was a tall black man in a red jogging sweatshirt that he never changed or washed, a gold Raiders' medallion around his neck and a blue waistpack slung around his hips. The pack hung like a scrotum because of the snub-nosed pistol in it. They called him Raiders because when his talk wasn't about grinding it was always about the Oakland Raiders; he held the team in reverence like they were gods.

Dwayne thought: Maybe I do it now. I could walk up to Samson when he's talking to Raiders and ask for the delivery work, talk him up good.

But he didn't have the nerve yet. The man didn't know him.

Dwayne stepped back into a doorway, where he wouldn't be noticed. He waited, listening in.

"'nother one died," Raiders was telling Samson, "and 'nother one killed with his head busted in."

"Same as old Hobey?" Samson asked.

"Same as Hobey. Head busted in like a melon."

Dwayne felt a strange contraction in his stomach. Hobey was dead? He hadn't heard. It was never a surprise to hear that someone he knew had died. He'd seen his father beat his mother with piece of pipe and he wasn't surprised when she died in the hospital. And two of his homeboys had died within a year of each other, one fighting over base and the other from heroin. And he had an aunt was a whore, died of pneumonia that was probably from AIDS. But Hobey had seemed like a survivor, like he was too careful to get himself popped.

It was kind of scary, Hobey being dead. Made Dwayne remember what Uncle Garland had said about Easy.

"They think dogs are gettin' into them," Raiders was saying. "Somebody bust their heads in, then wild dogs come along . . ."

"You making me sick, I don't need to hear this," Samson said, grimacing. "What makes you think it was the silver cap that did the other ones?"

"I sold it to them both half hour before. One of them went right here, died in the house, other one out in the alley."

"You get rid of them?"

"What you think?"

"So what you want me to do about this shit?"

"Maybe it's the bug spray."

"Everybody uses bug spray for bonding."

"Not this industrial shit we been getting. They use Black Flag or something. We oughta go back to it, maybe it's this stuff that's been—"

"Shut up. It's not us, *pendajo*.

Okay? This bug spray I got makes the stuff go farther, people like it, they come back for more, that's *bueno*."

"Reporters was hanging around the 'bood, s'afternoon. Nobody told 'em shit. And The Man be coming around. Asking shit."

"They connect it to us?"

"Not yet."

"Then fuck 'em. It's not us anyway." Samson made a dismissive motion, a hummingbird blur of his hand, and started toward the front steps that led up to the old two bedroom stucco place that was the neighborhood rockhouse.

Dwayne started to go after Samson. Froze when he saw Raiders glare at him. They'd already had a run-in. Come back when you got the green, Raiders had said, we

not hiring. You come around with money or we hammer your whole fucking body.

Samson was going into the house. Opportunity walking away. Dwayne rubbed his Big-thumb callouses with a forefinger, could almost feel a dove there, between his fingers. Could picture putting the dove in a pipe, firing up. Could almost taste it.

Once Samson was in his "office" there'd be no getting to see him. Not from where Dwayne was at in the pecking order.

Dwayne smelled base, someone smoking somewhere. Turned and saw Joleen in the front seat of a beat-up van, her head bobbing over some guy's lap. The guy firing a blast in a broken-off stem, the glow pulsing, lighting up a little blue skull tattoo on the guy's cheek, and showing his face. He was a big, dirty yellow-haired white guy, a biker type, with an overgrown beard and matted hair; a biker who'd had to sell his bike for crack.

Dwayne smelled the burning base. Watched the flare of pipe. Heard the biker grunt as the blast rocked him.

Fuck it. Dwayne couldn't stand it. He started up the stairs, after Samson. "Yo, Samson— I" be called after him. "Yo, my bro, wait up—"

But then Jim White Guy stepped out of the bushes with a gun. A .45 automatic. He was grinning. Motherfucker was real proud of himself.

10:15 P.M.

"You fucking with me, right?" Samson said.

Raiders shook his head. "While I was out, Ramon told me. Three more dead, just all in the last half hour, right here in this fucking house."

Samson and Raiders were in the pipe room, which had once been someone's living room. Now it was a big box, just a place to sit and smoke crack with a couple of burn-pocked mattresses on the floor and a smell like a shitty diaper from the plugged-up toilet in the bathroom off to one side. Naked bulb, windows double boarded over, linoleum curling up off the sagging wooden floor. Intricately calligraphed posse graffiti on the walls next to the mattresses. One broken stem in a corner.

Samson swore in Spanish. "What you do with them?"

"Some of the posse taking them to the dumpster behind the Pioneer Chicken place. I fucking don't know. I ain't smoking none of that silver cap."

"You don't be smoking at all around here. I go off on you, I catch you. Don't smoke at work." But he was thinking about something else.

"We use up this hatch, then maybe we switch to Black Flag for the bonding agent in the stuff — who's making it up?"

"The base? Ramon."

"He get sick?"

"Hard to tell with Ramon."

"Okay, we get rid of the Bug Deth now, but we use up this hatch of the cooking. That's forty, fifty thousand dollars, Raiders."

Raiders looked like he was about to argue when Ramon and Buzzy came running in, yelling, and Ramon was missing half his face.

10:18 P.M.

Jim stared at Dwayne. Jim wasn't sure how he was going to do this. Or what exactly he was going to do. Should he really do it, go ahead and kill him? Or maybe just kneecap him? Bust his knees open with a bullet. Fucking change his life for him. Ruin *his* transportation.

"How much you get for that shit you took off my car, Dwayne? More'n four hundred bucks? Probably less. Pretty pathetic, asshole."

Dwayne just stared back at him. "You got me confused with somebody, man." Maybe if he kept saying it, the guy'd buy it. Just keep saying it, make him doubt himself.

"No. Uh-uh. I was fucked up but I remember you vividly, Dwayne. And Joleen. I found her, see I figured she wasn't in on it, so I didn't shoot her, and she told me you'd be here eventually."

They were standing in the thick shadows by the dark green bushes, standing amidst dog crap in the balding front yard at an angle where nobody could see them but they could see most everybody. Jim White Guy had picked the spot carefully.

Inside the house, Ramon on his knees clutching his face, bloodunneling down his arm, and twining through the links of the gold chain on his chest. Sobbing. Samson trying to get a coherent story from him.

"The bodies in the dumpster what?"

And then the naked, filthy guys came stinking and stumbling into the piperoom and when Ramon saw them he screamed and scurried away on his hands and knees. Samson thought they were some kind of homeless lunatics until he saw that one of them was dragging his guts behind him on the floor.

Outside, Dwayne saying, "You mixed up, man, you piped up or something, got me mixed up wid somebody. It dark out here, too. Let's go in the light, over there, you see if it really me. Come on, put your gun in your pocket." All of this was halfhearted. Dwayne realized

he was hoping Jim White Guy would shoot him. Put a hole in the hole.

"You lying sack of shit," Jim Diggins said.

Dwayne took a step back, into the streetlight shine. Jim took a step toward him. Aimed the gun.

Then they heard the screaming from the house, and the gunshots. Three seconds of Dwayne and Jim gaping at the house. Another thirty seconds of uncertainty, staring at one another. Dwayne saying, "We better get the fuck—" That's when the naked, coughing man with brains on his fingers came staggering out of the darkness by the bushes, coming from the back door. Coming at them.

Dwayne knew it was brains on the naked man's fingers, because of the head the dude was carrying under his arm. It was a handsome head with a lot of hair that waved like a jacket fringe as the naked guy moved. A big gouge taken out of the skull. It was Samson's head.

"Oh fuck," Dwayne said. Recognizing Samson's still-twitching face on the severed head. Seeing that the naked motherfucker lunatic had one nasty, fifth-caked hand in the hole in Samson's head, was scooping out the brains, eating them, using his fingers like a kid eating the frosting left over in a bowl . . .

Jim and Dwayne stared at the naked guy. A white guy with a bloated stomach and snaggle brown teeth. The naked guy was staring back without blinking, his milky eyes not moving. Standing there, swaying like he might fall over any second.

Jim was making a choking sound down in his throat.

The naked guy dropped Samson's head. Thump. It rolled a little, in the grass. The naked dude thrust his head out a little on his neck, like a cat, and sniffed at them. Sniff. Sniff again. Then he made a croaking sound, his mouth exuding a stink that made Dwayne want to puke. He took a step toward Dwayne. Sniffing. Made another sound. A word this time.

"Base."

He reached his hands up toward Dwayne's head.

Dwayne backed away and fell over. The guy dropped to his knees beside Dwayne and gnashed his teeth at him, reached for his head and . . .

Dwayne hoarsely yelling, "Jim, help me, man!" This wasn't the way to die. Not this way. Uh-uh, no.

Jim hesitated. Then he fired the .45 at the naked guy. Blam. The flash strobe lighting up the yard for a tenth of a second, a flame licking out, the dead man staggering —

Oh yes, Dwayne knew it was a dead man.

Staggering, turning toward Jim, all his movements like flinches. The dead man with a hole right through its heart.

Jim felt unreal, looking at the walking dead man. Like he should lean back in his chair and reach for the popcorn and just let things happen on a screen. He fought the feeling, thinking: *this is happening to me*. Aiming the



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gun this time as the corpse came at him, aiming at the dead man's head. Blam, flash, right between the eyes. It went down like a puppet with its strings cut.

Then it started thrashing, kind of floppy-sideways on the ground, like a landed fish. Making sputtering sounds, shit and blood running down its leg from its butt. One of its eyes swelling up, popping out with yellow and red fluid, as it began to crawl with one arm, pulling itself toward them.

"Base," it rasped. "Crack. Rock. Silver top. Base."

There were three more coming around the other corner of the house. Two more on the street, coming down the sidewalk. Mostly naked. One of them didn't have any eyes, and it had a rusty piece of metal through its middle, its head moving hurky-jerky. All of them coming toward Jim and Dwayne.

One of them was carrying Joleen's head. Her head raggedly torn off at the neck. Holding her head up to its face, hitting into Joleen's forehead. The naked men coming at them sniffing, snuffling . . .

Dwayne and Jim ran up the stairs, into the house.

Both of them yelling the same thing so much in synch it sounded rehearsed: "FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUUUUUCK!"

10:35 P.M.

They found two freshly killed women in the front hall, one with her head missing, the other one with her head only half attached. The top gone from that head. Scooped out. Part of the brain. Just part of it. They only wanted . . .

Jim threw up in the pipe room.

Samson's body was curled up in one corner, a puddle still spreading out from it, Ramon dead beside it, face down. The back of his head gone. One of the naked guys was clawing feebly at a closet door. Strings of entrails had dragged behind it, leaving a rancid trail on the floor, the top of its head shot off. It was scraping like a cat at the closet door, and they could hear someone sobbing in there, someone hiding in the dark closet.

The naked hulk lit the room brightly, every corner of it. Stark and sharp.

Jim straightened up, feeling like he was going to hyperventilate and walked over to the crawling thing at the closet door (thinking about what it was, with quiet amazement: a human being gone literally rotten, dead meat dragged around by hunger like an empty cart dragged by a rabid horse. It was entropy that could feel hunger; scraping at the door in a tape loop of robotic stupidity, a thing that had once been a person, someone whose picture had appeared in some high school year book . . .) and shot it twice in the back of the head, near the spine. It twitched

and slumped, then started moving again — but weak now, like a dying roach. Probably have to incinerate the son of a bitch to really kill him, Jim thought.

Feeling numb, Jim dragged it away by the ankle and shoved it in the bathroom, crammed a board under the doorknob to lock the thing in. It made faint scrahhing sounds behind the door.

Jim went back to the closet. It was a long way across the little room. "Come on out, man, I shot the fucking thing," Jim said to the guy in the closet. He wanted living people around him.

Dwayne was pushing bodies up against the door to the hall. Samson's headless body, Ramon's body. Dwayne was crying without tears, his face contorted like a little kid's. Jim looked at him and thought: He's no more criminal than I am. Just another guy on a street corner. Used to be a kid watching Saturday morning cartoons.

Dragging mattresses up against the door, dumping them on the bodies, now. That wouldn't work for long. Those things could pull people's heads off. They were strong.

Jim opened the closet door. A black dude in a grimy jogging outfit was crouched in there, hugging his knees, shaking. An Oakland Raiders medallion on a heavy gold chain around his neck. There was a little snub-nosed gun on the floor between his feet. Probably used up all the rounds in it.

"Raiders, thas Raiders," Dwayne said.

"There a phone here?" Jim asked Raiders, tasting vomit in his mouth.

"They gone?"

"No. They're outside," Jim said. Fighting panic. Fighting the urge to shove the guy out of the closet and get in it himself. "I said, 'Is there a phone here?'" "Don't lose it don't lose it don't lose it . . .

"In the office."

"Where's that?"

"Behind the steel door, down the hall. Give me that fucking gun."

"No way." Jim turned his back on Raiders. Stepped over the corpse. The dead thing made a movement with its whole body like a worm on a hot sidewalk, and then lay still again.

Jim stopped in the middle of the room, his gun in his hand, wanting to scream but not having the energy, still sick to his stomach, thinking that all this should feel dreamlike, but it didn't now, not anymore.

That was because there was a smooth and ordinary continuity between being strung out, crashing on crack, perceiving himself as human vermin . . . and being here, with the dying and the dead who moved around.



RICK  
BUCKLER

It all felt like one, seamless thing, to him. Like the fall of a pebble into a mine shaft was part of the pebble's splashing into slime and mud. It had all led right here.

The hall door beaved inward, cracking down the middle. A black woman's face with milky eyes in the hreak. *Big* black woman wearing bloodstained designer jeans, but naked above the waist. She had one enormous pendulous breast, the other mostly chewed away. Somehow he knew she'd chewed it away herself. One of her eyes was missing. Her upper lip raggedly absent so that her teeth showed in permanent feral baring. She was pushing through the blocked doorway, pressing the broken wood aside, moving slow as lava over the dead bodies and the mattress blocking her way.

Fumbling, but inexorable, like the motion of a big maggot feeling its way along, as she shoved through the broken door.

Climbing over the dead. The dead climbing over the dead.

"Base," she said, in a croak. "Crack. Rock. Silver top. Base."

"Some kind of poison in the base," Dwayne whispered to himself. He was standing with his back to the wall opposite the door, just looking at her. "Kills them and the dark wave brings them back."

"The dark what?" Jim asked.

"Garland ... Uncle Garland said—"

He shook his head. "It's just too much greed, he said one time. Spills over and changes things..."

Dwayne and Jim stared at the woman, and then at the two dead men coming in behind her. They weren't cooperating with her consciously, but shoving in beside her like impatient commuters forcing their way onto a BART train. Two walking dead men, one white, an aging punk rocker, and the other black. Their faces peeling away. One of them missing his eyes.

The light flickered. Jim thought the hulh was going to go out and they'd be in here, in the dark with these things sniffing after them. The light flickered again, but didn't quite go out. The shadows fluttered and shifted, distorting the way things looked. Like the faces on those two living dead men in the hall. Jim thought, in the flickering light, that their faces had changed. Their faces become Dwayne's face, Jim Diggins' face. Mouthing, "Base, Rock. Silver Top. Base."

Jim nodded. Looking at himself dead, face blue, skin peeling away, bone in his throat exposed like the broomstick in a scarecrow. Flies crawling in and out of his nostrils.

And the truly-dead, those that the two living-dead men were crawling over, were Patty and some black woman Jim had never seen, but knew somehow was Dwayne's aunt.

DeadDwayne and dead Jim clambering over Patty and the black woman, crawling toward the living Dwayne

and Jim; the dead, reaching out for a bit, a dose, a blast: of life.

The light flickered again, and then the men crawling through the doorway were no longer Dwayne and Jim, they were once more men with the faces of strangers, and they were coming on through, stumbling toward them, sniffing, snuffling. Toward Dwayne's head and Jim's head. Going for the cocaine they smelled in their living brains. Some particular combination of drug residue and brain chemistry. Some semblance of life. In some sense mutated by crack to hunger for crack-rancid brain ... living brain.

Jim raised his gun —

Raiders stepped up from behind, clouted Jim on the side of the head with the empty snuhoose. Jim went to his knees, skull tolling like a cracked hell, and Raiders yanked the gun from Jim's hand, ran at the big dead black woman shrieking "FUCKING FREAK BITCH CUNT!" Firing the gun into her face. She threw her arms around him like a loving mother, then fell backwards, pulling him onto her. The two hungry dead men behind her lunged onto him, biting down on his head. Sharing it, biting into Raiders' skull from both sides. Jim could bear the sound of it, of their teeth in the bone of Raiders' cranium. A squeaking grating sound that seemed somehow louder than Raiders' scream.

Then Raiders was quiet, and there were wet, crunching noises. Dwayne said, "Fuck this," and was dragging a mattress up, holding it like a shield. Jim got up, got behind the mattress with him, and helped him shove it onto the mass of feeding dead

blocking the doorway, using the mattress to keep the dead down so Jim and Dwayne could scramble over it and out into the hall. Two more of the dead were swaying in the front door. Dwayne and Jim dodged to the right, down the hall. The office. Through the open steel door

A kitchen. An AK47, without a magazine in it, lay on a old, ornate wooden kitchen table. Next to it was a freezer bag full of base crystal, half spilled onto the table top. On a sink to the back was a big, five gallon steel pot crusted with crack cocaine residue. A gallon can of something called BUG DETH All New! Industrial Strength for Big Jobs! stood on the counter next to the sink. The bonding agent. There was a dead Hispanic boy in the corner, eating something. He had been about twelve. He was eating raw crack from another freezer bag, a sack with blood and brains dripped into it; chewing bloody crack cocaine up like a mouth full of rock candy.

There was a dead man on the floor; missing his head, too. Near the dead man, also on the floor, was a phone off the hook with a mechanical voice coming out of it, small and foolish, saying, "If you are not going to make a call, please hang up the telephone..."

Jim almost dove for the phone. Crouched in blood, by the stump of a neck, with an effort of will he

## Climbing over the dead. The dead climbing over the dead.

made his hands work the touchtone buttons. His heart going off like one of those obnoxious car alarms.

The dead were coming down the ball. Scuffling. Making sniffing sounds. Dwayne scooped up a handful of the base fallen on the table, a big handful of crystals, couple thousand dollars worth. Stared at it hungrily. Jim watched the boy in the corner eating bloody rock cocaine, while he told 911 that there were murders happening here. Not trying to explain more than that. (Thinking, in some twitchy corner of his mind, that it would be easy to get a handful or two of the rock for himself, hide it somewhere, come back after the cops and the things were gone, fuck it, it wasn't like anything mattered anymore – and then he had a flash vision of himself chewing a hole in his own kid's head.) Jim told Dwayne, as he hung up the phone, "The shit's poisonous, Dwayne, even more than usual."

Dwayne looked at the double handful of rock cocaine. Then bent over, dipped the base in a puddle of blood and brains and tossed the whole double-handful through the door, into the hall. Scrabbling, clawing sounds as the dead went for it.

Jim Diggins carried the phone across the small room, and smashed the head of the dead boy eating the cocaine, twice, crushed his skull, very thoroughly, with a corner of the phone, each blow making the phone ring a little.

The boy slumped, twitching, bloody cocaine dribbling from his mouth ... not dead, you couldn't kill them that easy.

11:30 P.M.

A lot of cops milling around.

The Detective in charge was named Johnson, a tall, mild-eyed black guy, a uniformed lieutenant with a college cadence to his talk. Jim had ditched the .45. Didn't tell the cops the background to the story. Johnson listened to the story, as Jim told it, then went to his cruiser, his face flashing in and out of red with the cherry-top light. He spoke into a microphone, something about cocaine-overdose hallucinations and mass murder and hysteria, as the paramedics carted the truly-dead away. Paramedics shaking their heads in weary amazement.

Carrying the *dead* dead. The others, the ambulatory dead, had crawled out back, when the cops had come. Hid themselves. Still functioning, instinctively, to protect themselves. Still out there, in the city, somewhere, sniffing around. Settling for any kind of living flesh they could find, now, Jim supposed.

But then again, it wouldn't take them long to find more crack heads.

Dwayne and Jim stood to one side. They'd been told to wait, put on the back burner for the moment. Johnson was convinced they were bystanders, not the killers. Jim said, "Shit like this doesn't happen by accident, Dwayne. Something's talking to us. All of us."

Dwayne said nothing. He stared at light on the cop car. The headless bodies being hoisted into the ambulance.

Jim said, "What your Uncle said about a sickness in the air, the dark wave thing ... Well, shit. I don't know. I mean, I don't know if there's a God, man, but I think we ought to act as if there is one, you know?"

Dwayne still said nothing.

"Dwayne?"

Dwayne said, softly, "I gettin' the fuck out of here."

"Where you going to go?"

"Way different neighborhood."

"Is that right? Hey, Lieutenant Johnson!"

The cop said something more into the mike, then walked over to them. "Yeah?"

"This man here stole my car. A few days ago. I went to talk to him about it when all this happened . . ."

Dwayne said, "He's full of shit."

Jim said, "They dusted the car for prints. I insisted on it. They got your prints, Dwayne. They got evidence of that. Not of anything else." Meaning: no evidence that Jim had been buying drugs.

Dwayne looked at Jim like he was going to bite through Jim's skull himself. "You pale motherfucker."

"Just what I need," Johnson was saying, wearily putting cuffs on Dwayne. "As if I don't have enough to deal with. You have the right to remain silent . . . He went through the whole thing.

"You don't know what I do for a living, Dwayne," Jim said, later, talking through the half-open window of the car; Johnson had put Dwayne in the back of a cruiser. "I'm a lawyer. I've gotta lot of connections. I can get you remanded to my custody, set you up in drug rehab. Both of us in drug rehab."

"Fuck you, you pale bullshit motherfucker."

"You better hold onto that attitude, you're gonna need it sometime, Dwayne. I'm doing this to help, man. Because I had a choice and you didn't."

"You think you on a Mission? Fuck you, you knee-jerk liberal cocksucker!" Dwayne shouted out the car window as Johnson started the cruiser and drove off.

Jim was taken to the precinct in another cop car. After awhile all the rest of the police cars drove off into the night, vanishing into the darkness where the hungry dead were shuffling, sniffing the air.

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# The Lion and The Cucumber



Philip Nutman

Let's talk.

Let's talk about the Darkness and the Light. And how, by exploring that darkness, it can (and should) help us define the light.

Still with me?

Well, for those of you who have never heard the word *metaphor*, that's what I have just used.

A metaphor is, as defined by Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary*, a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (e.g. *drowning in money*.)

So, I'm not talking about stumbling around in a blacked-out room until we find the door and walk out into blinding fluorescent light, you moron. I'm referring to investigating the negative side of human experience so we can get a full grasp of what we should truly aspire to achieve in the way we conduct ourselves and respond to our fellow man (and woman -- oh, hell let's be totally politically correct here: our fellow bipedal mammals with homo sapien brains.)

Usually, when people I meet learn that I'm a writer, they ask what do I write, and I tell them. And I get either one of two responses. The first, if they are people who are afraid of the world around them (and that includes their own deepest, darkest desires, needs, and fears -- denial, the cornerstone of late 20th century life) is one of revulsion: "Uggh! You write that stuff?! Why?" Frequently, they don't want to hear the answer, or won't even bother to try to listen. Then, if it's the second type of personality, the reaction is, "Wow! Cool! I love Dean Koontz. And I've read everything by Anne Rice -- including her grocery list -- and I adore Stephen King..." etc., etc.

With the latter kind of person, however, someone who actually reads books, I often am depressed to discover that they don't really understand why they a)read it; b)like it; or c) what horror is really about.

Horror, award-winning editor, author and critic Douglas E. Winter (*Stephen King: The Art of Darkness*, *Prime Evil*, etc.) has stated repeatedly, is an emotion not a type.

Okay, now if you're even more confused...

What that means is horror (i.e. "a painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay" -- Webster's) is a feeling, not a can of beans. Which is how publishers used to market "horror fiction" until, a couple of years ago, they decided it wasn't worth doing anymore, and that's why you can't go to a bookstore and find fifty or more "horror" novels in the "horror" section. (These days, if a store has a section with that genre label -- genre, you retard, is a French word meaning "a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition

characterized by a particular style, form, or content" -- all you'll find is three shelves of King, and equal space devoted to Koontz and Rice, and maybe Brian Lumley's Necroscope series. Then there's the immortal V.C. Andrews, who has written more books since she died than she ever did when she was alive and miserable. And maybe -- just maybe -- one or two books by other authors.) It wasn't so much a case of what was being written, although much of it was redundant shit, it was the way it was marketed by said publishers which almost killed the form. You know what I'm talking about: covers featuring little kids with screaming skulls for faces, holographic covers where little kids turn into screaming skulls; Newt Gingrich dressed as a demonic clown with a screaming skull... (cue gagging noise.)

Chances are, you'll never find a copy of the great Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, or Ira Levin's seminal *Rosemary's Baby*, or Thomas Tyron's wonderful *The Other*. Or any of the good, solid, well-written novels published over the last ten years, the authors of which know not only how to tell a good story, they understand how to genuinely get inside your head and your heart and stimulate the reader. You certainly won't find anything by Charles L. Grant, Ramsey Campbell, or T.E.D. Klein.

And if you are sitting there reading this going, who?, then you are just the kind of person I'm aiming this column at. So sit down, shut up, listen, and learn.

I recently attended my first Horror Writers Association Annual Business Meeting in three years, a kind of mini-convention for professionals built around the Bram Stoker Awards ceremony which exists to celebrate and applaud works of excellence. Although I've been a member of the organization for seven years, and involved one way or another since its inception almost a decade ago, I've been missing in action for a while due to other commitments. The organization exists to act as a professional network -- a union if you like -- to support, encourage, and aid writers, who, by the nature of their work, are solitary, isolated individuals. Especially to encourage and advise those just starting out in this crazy, wonderful business. But I found the experience to be terribly depressing.

A lot of new members have joined over the last couple of years. Most of them are starting out and have published nothing because the field is about one seventh the size it was eight years ago. Regardless of this, I was disturbed to discover, during several conversations that many of these fledgling "horror" writers don't read the good stuff, and seemed largely unaware of whose authors' books they should seek out and learn from.

Now listen up, and listen good, Goober. Here are the Three Golden Rules:

One: if you want to write -- read.

Two: if you want to write well, then write -- every day, no excuses. And read the Good Stuff.

And Three: engage brain before opening your mouth and swallowing your foot, or any other part of you anatomy I might decide to shove in your top orifice if you annoy or piss me off.

Now, if you're just interested in reading, that's fine. That's going to be one of my focal points in this column: pointing you in the direction of authors you may have never heard of, or in places where you least expect to find horror.

Personally, I hardly ever read anything written that's supposedly in the genre these days. For one simple reason: most of what comes my way (and on average I get sent several short stories every month, and occasionally a novel typed on the backs of someone's old love letters, Hell help me) is crap. It's either a tired, unimaginative retread of something someone else published years ago, or the "author" is one of those mixed-up souls who confuses gore and explicit violence with "horror" -- which is not the point. Where I get my kicks, my emotional Mike-Tyson-Just-Gave-Me-A-Right-Hook vicarious, cathartic *frisson* (look them

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up in the dictionary, you lazy butthead) is in the mystery genre. Authors like Andrew Vachas, James Ellroy, and James Lee Burke have been delivering the disturbing stuff in spades for years, and that's where I turn to when I want to go explore the darkness (bet you thought I'd forgotten about that, huh?)

But before I get to the punchline, I'm going to give you your first homework assignment and urge you to go check out two books, one a short story collection, the other an acclaimed novel. Specifically, *The Convulsion Factory*, the first collection of works by Brian Hodge (*Deathgrip*, *Prototype*), and *The Girl Next Door* by Jack Ketchum. And before we go any further, let's get this out of the way (so it doesn't come back to haunt me): I penned the intro to Brian's stunning volume, and wrote, alongside Lucy Taylor, Edward Lee, and Christopher Golden, one of the afterwords to the Ketchum novel (Stephen King wrote the essay-length intro.)

Now before you accuse me of shilling my own works, oh brow-beaten reader, let me clarify something. I didn't get paid a dime to contribute to either volume, and nor will I receive profits from sales. I took time off from contracted, deadline-sensitive projects to write these pieces, for no other reason than the fact they are both great books and I was delighted to be involved. And to hopefully draw others' attentions to these volumes.

Unfortunately, due to the current state of publishing, both these books are only available as limited editions from small presses. In a just world, you'd be able to perambulate into your local Waldenbooks/B. Dalton and pluck a copy from the shelf. In this less-than-ideal paradise of dreck-driven consumerism, you'll have to order them from either the publishers or your local specialty bookstore (assuming you have one.)

Jack Ketchum is the author of several great novels, most recently *Stranglehold* and *Joy Ride*, and has a healthy cult reputation based on his first novel, *Off Season* (1980). This particular book is renowned as being the first true "splatter" novel, and deals with a family of inbred cannibals living off tourists on the coast of Maine. But for my money, his most riveting -- and emotionally painful -- work is *the Girl Next Door*, based on a true story, which deals explicitly with child abuse. The novel was originally published by Warner Books in (1989) and died in stores almost immediately as a direct result of the kind of retarded marketing I mentioned above. Here is a book about a taboo -- and very serious -- subject which appeared in stores with a cover featuring a skeletal cheerleader with pom-poms leaping in the air."Which has nothing whatsoever to do with its content, and looks more like a teens-have-sex-and-die slasher flick of the *Hello, Mary Lou: Prom Night II* sub-genre.

All you need to know is that this book comes highly recommended but is not one I can honestly say you will enjoy -- especially if you're looking for safe escapism. It is a highly disturbing story, part teenage infatuation memoir, part sick, guilty secret, and, ultimately as a result of Ketchum's precise prose, an implication of you, the reader, as participant.

As a collection of stories, *The Convulsion Factory* is almost as powerful, though it works on another level. Whilst Ketchum's novel operates in the real world, Hodge's stories drag the reader into a post-industrial urban hell of polymorphous-perverse sexual transformation, cellular decay, existential ennui, and amputation. At least, that's just the beginning...

As I state in my intro, *The Convulsion Factory* is the most exciting, stimulating collection I have read since Clive Barker kept me up all night when I got my hands on the first three volumes of his *Books of Blood*, over a decade ago.

Here is a book about a taboo -- and very serious -- subject which appeared in stores with a cover featuring a skeletal cheerleader with pom-poms leaping in the air. Which has nothing whatsoever to do with its content, and looks more like a teens-have-sex-and-die slasher flick of the *Hello, Mary Lou: Prom Night II* sub-genre.

I could continue to wax lyrical over these two books, but I'm almost out of space for this issue. But then, if I laid all my cards on the table, you wouldn't have anything to look forward to, would you?

Part of the reason I mention them is because the themes, the execution, and the attitude presented by both books act as perfect examples of the point I intend to present you with.

To wit: horror ain't just King, Koontz, or Rice, baby. Nor is it simply Poppy Z. Brite (much as I adore her) or Peter Straub, or any of the other "genre" writers I enjoy or admire.

It's about exploring the Darkness to define the Light.

I'll deliver the punch-line next issue -- and explain the title of this column.

Until then, please feel free to send hate-mail c/o the editorial address or email me at [philnutman@aol.com](mailto:philnutman@aol.com).

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*The Girl Next Door* will be available from The Overlook Press in a signed, numbered limited edition (price). To order contact The Overlook Connection, PO Box 526, Woodstock, GA 30188. Phone: (770) 926-1782. Fax: (770) 516-1469. Email: [Overlookcn@aol.com](mailto:Overlookcn@aol.com)

*The Convulsion Factory* will be published sometime this fall. For info, write Silver Salamander, 4128 Woodland Park Avenue North, Seattle, WA 98103.

*Philip Nutman has published nearly two dozen short stories in major anthologies, hundreds of articles and is the author of the acclaimed novel, Wet Work, which was nominated for the Bram Stoker Award. He does not suffer fools and loves eating sushi.*



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# THE HAPPY LANGUAGE

Ian Grey

Davey blinked, thinking he must have blurred on some stray Language. He had no memory of her falling to the corrugated steel floor, where Melissa's head now rested against an exposed drainage pipe. The Happy Language drifted up from the club and pit below, from speakers in the walls, from everywhere.

He pulled a nugget of old victory meat from between his teeth, and looked down at her. Melissa. Melissa. So pretty. His girl for now and forever.

"Kiss me," he said.

They kissed, bodies hot under sheer Cruel Suits, the material boosting the mood. Both fell to the steel, one cried.

"Melissa?"

She wiped the tear from her one natural eye (flawed), which stared miserably at him. The other glittered prettily, prosthetically unaware.

"We've got to join The Circle."

So? he wondered. Everyone joined The Circle.

But not yet, not now.

Back when he'd been Second Line, there'd been a malfunction, and he'd wandered through a door Outside. He froze there, waiting for the Hook, scrap-pile desert everywhere. Ugly, barren, a smirking landscape. A new road cut through the rubble, ending at the horizon and the glittering emerald spires of City. Along the road holo-signs sputtered on and off. One read VULGAR PROGRAMMES! in convulsing Victorian letters.

Then the power surged back on inside, and the Hook jerked his lean meat body back into The Pit Club, The Circle. The gallery gods, dressed to the nines, waited, purses full, eyes glazed for meat.

Alone now with his love in their private place, a flurry of images (memories?) flitted in Davey's shattered head: sucking at his breeders teat, wandering sky-sick over cracked asphalt and bones, leaving the tin hut at night alone.

Looking for a way out.

He fought to retain these images, these possible memories. Despite Language and mnemonics, he was getting better at it. Memory gave him strength, and strength gave him anger.

Last night had been tank drama, the pit filled with what had looked like water but was in reality random burn acid. A quick treat hut not the real item, not the long haul shred the gods adored.

Tonight though:

Eat or be eaten. Or eat and be eaten. Survival of the fittest, Natural Selection.

*But we're different,* Davey thought. We have love. Like in a full-scan Rubbey Disk. Love all wet and hot and always there. Davey and Melissa, memory blanketed admirers of The Pit.

She was still crying. He glanced at her discarded hriefs, the small stain of drying blood on them. This was new, inexplicable. Frightening. He looked away, the fear draining away stored anger.

Bad, losing anger. Dangerous.

But he loved her, so: "C'mon honey! Listen! The Happy Language!"

She smiled weakly and his heart hurt worse than teeth. . . "Yes, I can hear it. Okay. Let's go."

Stilluzzing from the gro-mone high, they stood. Kissed, with Davey thinking what a miracle life could be, finding a private place that offered everything and took nothing but their waste. The smell and the still fresh spatter of god seed were frightening reminders.

At other times, this place was known. Used.

But before their shifts, it was theirs. Relief from the body's demands, in private. Love too.

It could end at any time. He wished he had words how all this made him feel, but words were expensive, and the dealers cruel.

Arms wrapped around his love, his Melissa, he closed the door behind them softly and all at once The Happy Language and The People Beat became so loud it was like a fury of noise angels were lifting them from their cares and down to The Pit Club.

*Do not ask who the gods are...do not complain,* came the mnemonic, sadness leeching at his anger as he closed the door behind them —

— *they are above as others are below* —

— the one he knew he might never see again after tonight that read in cracked old letters:

## GENTLEMEN ONLY.

Tonight was the big show, the eliminator.

First-Liner against Third. All and sundry hot to see who would advance to Second and who would go free. The Club with its distant walls of matte black aluminum seemed bigger than usual, with more space than a disc pony-show western. With enough smoke or blood-spray, the floor seemed to mist away into a horizon of thick darkness. Like real night, Davey would imagine. Peace.

Above the Pit and the cages, the rafters were filled to bursting with gallery gods. Jeers, taunts, yelling, all nearly lost in the People Beat din.

A sing-song voice from the bar: "Davey! Davey! Pocket full of crazy!"

Willy Zero. The poor kibble-shit couldn't even rhyme in a way that made sense, he'd lost so much brain. Davey ignored him, and ordered a shot of Roid Fizzy

from the bar. Gulped it in one swallow, seeing himself grow bigger in his mind's eye. Melissa was talking to some old

## "Davey! Davey! Pocket full of crazy!"

Line-Two cronies. Davey relaxed, waiting for the bell. The young girls the gods called Filly Lees raised their lacy frocks as they yelled up at the rafters, "— penny can I, penny can I please! —" over and over, waiting for the dribble of short change and match cover appointments.

Suddenly something small and hard bumped into Davey. A ribcage from the feel of it.

From a tangle of dirty blond hair, a breeder tart lisped, "You 'onna eat me tonight, 'avey?"

"Who are you?"

The girl curtsied, winked, stuck out a halved tongue. "I 'eard about 'ou, 'avey. Eat 'em up 'avey, they all say. Got a heart 'a s-s-teel."

She giggled.

Davey looked away, feeling himself lose some anger over this, some sort of screw-up with Management. Letting scrawny, dirty-gene Third-Liners into the bar. Walking meat, most of them, ready for the death mill.

But then again, he'd been a Third-Liner himself once, and he'd survived. Moved up, a line at a time.

The girl proved herself ambitious, grabbing his crotch abruptly, making eye contact to remind him she was a person, not just a blank faced opponent. With great effort, she said, "My name's Tessy, hear me? T - E - S - S - Y. 'essy. You ever 'et your fill, eat 'em up 'avey, you re'ember 'essy."

She let go of him, grinned, and started rubbing herself. "Anyway you want, I all yours. Pain 'n all, I like it. But listen — I'm 'enetic trash, and I 'aste like shit, no lie. You re'ember that, okay?"

Then she scampered off into the club haze.

"Who the fuck was that?"

Melissa, just back from her shots.

"Nobody, hon. Just some lamb."

Her face reddened. "I'll shred the little bitch. You're mine."

He nodded, knowing it was part 'roid rage but still wondering how jealous she could be when they were both First Line now: one more round each, and freedom was theirs if they played it right.

Still, jealousy was anger and that was good.

The bell chimed and The Happy Language stopped. People who were milling about found their proper

places. The shapes in the rafters whispered excitedly, Management having turned down the volume for them. Davey went down to his cage, where the Beat was as loud as always. He worried briefly whether his heart would stop if he ever found a silent place, but killed the thought immediately. Keep positive.

Hate, hate, hate.

"Please! We must have some order!" shouted the suddenly spot-lighted form of Pete Monkey, the announcer. He was greeted with laughter from all. Pete looked very funny with all that hair and the gods loved him.

"We all know why we're here —"

Peels of laughter from the gallery, a round of quality sole leather stamping.

"— so let's get on with it!"

A powder flash and Pete was gone. A new spot glared down on a fifteen-foot-wide circle of painted flowers. Inside The Circle was a perforated aluminum cavity stuck ten feet deep into the clubfloor. Just cleaned, though the holes were still rimmed with day-old skin strips.

The Pit.

Davey went through his routine, systematically flexing a hard pump out of the body that had brought him nearly whole to the First Line, and could take him out of The Circle forever.

Nobody knew, of course, what happened to you Outside or in City, but there were rumors: one spoke of the existence of a distant lake village founded by his kind, another claimed there was a Club in City, but worse, since that was the gods' domain.

Either way, he'd have Melissa. That and his anger should serve him well Outside, whatever was there.

She smiled at him from the other side of The Pit, a diamond among the other First-Line girls. Next to their cage was that of the Third-liners, fresh, sassy and dumb.

Then a clatter of steel mesh as the gate fell open and the Third-Liners stumbled from their cage onto The Circle, many still wearing their breeders frocks. They slowly joined hands, eyes feral and wary. Waiting.

Davey almost felt sorry for them, thinking, wrong, all wrong. It was the loner who cut it, the loner who advanced to the next Line.

Dubbed over the People Beat came Pete Monkey's voice, chanting the countdown: "Ten, nine, eight, seven —"

It wasn't really fair, but Davey bit into his killroid sublingual anyway. A few seconds, and then his body jerked with the sudden chemo rush, blood turning to fire in his veins, the club now drenched in his own private red.

His world.

He hated it now. He hated *everything*. He saw himself in the scrap-pile, knifing his breeder before she could put him to market. He'd been a tight-muscled thing of pure spitting wrath when Management found him two years ago, working the Outskirt butt-trade.

His anger hit a teeth-stinging pitch. One more round, then escape. He grinned, thinking he'd shred to the bone any piece of breederfucking stink-meat that got in his way.

Pete was shouting as he finished the count: —three, two, one and *welcome* to the Spectacle of Natural Selection!"

All at once, Davey and the two other First-Line males pounced from their cage, drooling and yelling 'roid-jacked obscenities. His Cruel Suit clung to him, sucking meaning from his hate-sweat and then feeding the alpha hack in scatter bursts, his brain feeling like it would explode. Everything came in image-hurts as:

— he entered The Circle, hands reaching for the easy kill, a wiggly little piece of tart in dingy coveralls and a happy face button that had Davey shrieking with laughter as he beat the thing's face to a pulp, and ripped away the nose. Through a spray of blood and gristle, he cracked the skull in one hit, clawed away at fissured bone until he saw gray. He was gouging out handfuls, gulping them down without chewing, when something snapped free —

— a hral some breeder's final, pitiful attempt to play on his 'roid-fueled screw bigh. He burst out in laughter again, watched as the tiny silicone falsies popped crazily into the air as he sunk his teeth into the flat chest, moving down to the belly, more meat there, fresh but fatty but meat all the same —

— he'd taken another down, couldn't recall how in the chem-blood heat, but now he was looking down at an arm that had suddenly appeared in his hand, blood gushing from its body as someone screamed, "Eat it! Eat it! Eat it all!"

Tessy, standing at the edge of the Pit, hoping he'd get his fill and forget about her. Tessy, the girl who'd tried to gain his empathy.

Fuck her. She'd upset his Melissa, and anyway, she'd never last playing the sympathy card. He'd be doing her a favor.

Another mnemonic, this one sweet: "— and the big fish eat the little fish who —"

In one lunge, he was across the Pit and with little effort had gutted her, and shit, she was *pitiful*, she was *overweight* by at least a *pound*! Didn't her breeder have a fucking *scale*? The gallery gods roared their approval as he took her down...

Then the bell sounded and it was over for now.

Everything, his adrenals, the gro-mone and killroid seemed to burn out at once. He staggered out of the Pit, and crawled up to his cage.

The shapes in the rafters went mad with applause. After The Washer sprayed him down with antiseptic, the cage opened and he stumbled to the bar, ordering a cherry rickey.

Ten minute rest. Worry creased his face. What if one of the First-Liners facing Melissa were as stealthy as he'd once been, had used cheek-slit sublinguals, or worse?

The only thing he could think of that was scarier was if he were to find Melissa in The Pit for his round. Management did that sometimes to spice things up.

He couldn't take that. No drug could make him go down to The Pit with his love. He was sure.

No. He'd pleased the gods as he was sure she would, the biggest fish eating the littlest. Natural Selection, the same process by which they themselves became gods (it was claimed).

A spotlight, and then Pete told a few more jokes, showed his palms.

Then the bell and the cages rattled open. The Pit was filled and he watched from the bar as Melissa descended on the little ones there. His heart beat with love and pride, and he felt an almost intolerable desire for her lithe, fatless, twelve-year old body.

It was going well, with Melissa having already taken down three screaming brats, the knot in his belly relaxing when the unthinkable happened.

A shrieking pup, all raw muscle and teeth, jumped her, ripping away her Suit and tearing into her right breast. A resourceful breeder must have injected it with cal-shots, because the thing had nails like a nightmare, and Davey screamed in agony as blood spurted from his love's chest.

And as had or worse: he knew only gods had access to the shots. It was a trick. Third Line was the end.

She went down.

"No!" he shrieked, forgetting the rules. Love and 'roid traces erased years of Pavlov as he ran to the Pit in time to see Melissa's horn breast hanging from the tiny beast's mouth before it started chewing, eyes glassed over, insane.

Then he was there. Grabbing the thing by the bead, he snapped it's neck, heard the tiny sound of cracking spine. It died bloodlessly, without a word.

Davey walked over to the center of the Pit, saw the steel iris slide open, and dropped the limp thing in.

"Eat it! Eat it! Eat it all!"

The Club had gone silent. Nobody moved. A few surviving Third Liners fell on their asses and sucked their thumbs in wonder. Melissa looked up at him, pale with



blood loss, eyes still crying their love for him, filled with the knowledge that he was doomed.

The Happy Language filled the room again, insuring calm. Pete went up to the rafters to speak with somebody from Management. Davey had heard rumor of reprieves, but believed none of it. Not anymore. He slumped to the floor, slowly unzipping his Cruel Suit.

Pete and the man came down, spotlight trailing. Both looked at him very disappointingly while a medico pumped a shot of Dull into him. The Language swelled, grew louder, meaning upon meaning mixed in an endless blur of sound. Something clicked in his brain and he knew they were right: he was bad. That was why he was here, after all, something in his brain recited.

“—do not ask who the gods are, do not complain. They are above as you are below —”

The bell rang.

Davey looked over at Melissa, who'd been dragged by another medico outside The Circle, and he mouthed the words 'I love you,' hoping she could lip-read the 'forever' part.

Then he sunk his nails into the right side of his chest, tearing away as much flesh as he could.

It hurt beyond words, but not enough. At this rate, with his body shot full of Dull, he'd be working his intestines before he lost consciousness.

They were right. He was had stock, junk pile meat gone stupid with love and dreams.

Thinking love had anything to do with the Spectacle of Natural Selection.

The gallery gods roared.

He let out one last howl, and then filled his mouth.

Ω

# Camera Obscura



To start things off: the horror movie as we know it is dead. Let us mourn.

Ah, screw mourning. Let's just get the thing on the slab and see what the autopsy reveals.

Pushing past the latex guts, we see a case of atrophied genre, a collapse of the patient's primary function which, like it or not, is inextricably linked to the culture in which it was born. Pathology seems comprised of equal parts hemorrhaging of the idea pool, cancerous levels of high concept and market-targeting, bloated budget and severe sequelitis.

Not to be morbid or anything, but let's look at *Reality* and *The Traditional Horror Film* for evidence on how our once-beloved genre bit the dust so unglamorously.

*Reality*: a moribund economy, its newspeak pal "downscaling" and homelessness. AIDS, gender confusion galore, prozac-mania. The belief meltdown in church and state, the conflagration between the sexes (once merely a war). A general downward spin cycle that threatens to leave us all permanently stuck with our noses pressed against the window of a quality of life taken for granted just a few decades ago (assuming your skin was the right color).

*Reality* is Pat Buchanan scaring the hell out of two thirds of the nation as he froths his Bible-belt cracker-Nietzschean vision of a New White World free of faggots, art, yacking females and other annoyances. *Reality* is the job you've just lost, or are about to lose, so some fat cat can increase his portfolio earnings off cheap Third World labor.

Reality, it seems, really does bite.

Q: So how does the current horror film address or involve itself with these manifold cultural ills?

A (and it's a sad A): *Freddy*, *Jason*, *The Shape*. More interestingly, but de-sanguinated by sequels, the genre gives us an occasional *Pinhead* or *Candyman*.

And that's about it, icon-wise. Meanwhile, horror narratives are re-made, re-modeled nightmare-lites resulting in such banal or homage-hobbled spawn as *"Hideaway"*, *"Species"*, *"From Dusk 'til Dawn"* and more (and less.)

To wit: reality has taken the teeth from the horror film. Old saws like "The blood is the life" chill too closely, as "the blood" is the also "the death" now, our death, if the rubber rips. And it's hard to get too shaken up over Pumpkinhead when the Menendez Brothers stare at us from our screens.

For the Menendez Brothers are the real face of horror today – implacable, murderous, perhaps even justified in the slaughter of their parents – we'll never know. Mass media sucks essence and truth away in a manic-compulsive sort of auto-Nosferatu reflex. And with spiritual ilk like Jeff Dahmer, Cardinal O'Conner and other monstrosities, you'd need a filmic gene-splice of the collected works and methods of Hitchcock, DeSade and the Grand Inquisitor to come up with a new trad horror film icon that could beat out CNN for sheer, gut-rending terror.

Once, the *primary function* of the standard horror movie was as a shared psychic sieve/ritual for the temporary mass exorcism of social/cultural/psychological demons. But not anymore, or at least not often.

The tricks of the horror trade have been devoured/assimilated by most every form of cinematic entertainment. "Action" films slaughter our social ilk stand-in villains with as much gruesome aplomb as any slasher film. Vampires become a homoerotic gender tease for confused teens (see: Anne Rice,) or impenetrable postmodern Ur-texts (see Ferrara's "The Addiction", Aleymada's "Nadia",) or are regurgitated in the more metaphoric forms of "Wall Street's" Gordon Gekko, or the Cathy Moriarty character in "Caspar" (a "children's film", which gives a clue just how scary the old monsters are.)

Meanwhile, body fluid terror leaks from genre efforts like "The Fly" to a spate of cautionary tales of corporeal anxiety ("Safe", "When A Man Loves A Woman", "Casper" again,) while the reproductive anxieties of Baby Busters show up both literally and figuratively dead/alive (The Addams Family films, "Village of the Damned".) Gender-role angst crops up in everything from femme-action fests ("T2", "The Temp") to an endless vengeance-filled "erotic thrillers".

From this quick overview, it would seem clear that the prime location of fear and dread isn't the horror section of your local friendly video outlet, but the entire damned store itself.

Okay, now that we've buried the traditional horror film, let's look at films that, consciously or not, work in the register of horror, but are (to borrow Kim Newman's fine appellation) more accurately tagged as "Nightmare Movies".

Because *these* are the films that this column will focus on.

Although new mainstream releases will be given the devil's due, much attention will be devoted to films most video-store shoppers might pass on as junk or worse. So forget the latest Halloween opus (if you haven't already.) The act of renting such fare is, at best, an indulgence in nostalgia verging on a latex 'n grue fetish.

And anyway, real horror is simply *not allowed* (with the occasional slip like "Seven") in upbeat Hollywood. Imagine a Sony exec backing a truly disturbing film knowing his product placement may end up next to a rotting corpse (as appropriate as the image may be.)

But Nightmare Movies are out there; you just have to know where to look. It is hoped this column will help.

Mass media sucks essence and truth away in a manic-compulsive sort of auto-Nosferatu reflex. And with spiritual ilk like Jeff Dahmer, Cardinal O'Conner and other monstrosities, you'd need a filmic gene-splice of the collected works and methods of Hitchcock, DeSade and the Grand Inquisitor to come up with a new trad horror film icon that could beat out CNN for sheer, gut-rending terror.

The belief here is that the discovery of subtext-rich, transgressive image/narrative heavy films are more likely to be found in Z-list video programmers and "non-genre" oddities than Tobe Hooper's latest career slide.

Many of these DTVs (direct to videos) will be dreadful in many ways, but all will provide handy pointers and examples of modern malaise, as in Brian Yuzna's unjustly ignored "Society", Ami Nesher's alternately campy/disturbing "Doppleganger", and Sandor Stern's brilliant "PIN". Key films of pre-millennial fright would include Mike Leigh's study in social/sexual anarchy "Naked", Todd Haynes aforementioned bio-terror epic "Safe", and Abel Ferrara's merciless meditation on finding redemption in a cruelly secular world, "Bad Lieutenant".

As for mainstream efforts, we suggest a long look at Michael Tolkin's "The New Age", with The Monster played by the U.S. economy, or the same director's "The Rapture", where God Himself fills Boris Karloff's shoes.

But fear not, if all this sounds a bit too grim and humorless, we will also find plenty of (black) humor in the continuing foibles, fuck-ups and foul play that characterize The Dream Factory. Whatever we call it, we are still dealing with a genre that, despite all the surface nastiness, is still inherently positive; to prescribe the right medicine, one must first be able to pinpoint the illness.

So, with a readjustment of expectation and vision, we can see that Nightmare Movies are doing just fine, thank you.

And here's some current proof that should be hitting the video racks by the time you read this:

#### THE YOUNG POISONER'S HANDBOOK

Directed by Benjamin Ross. With: Hugh O'Conor, Antony Sher, Ruth Sheen. 99mn.

Graham's a nice lad. He's polite and excels at school. Especially in chemistry. But Mum's a haggard shrew, Dad's a TV-soaked twit, and Sis has the brain-capacity of a self-involved ground sloth. They live in a grotty, puke-colored early 60's England. There is no hope. There's barely enough cash around for poor Graham to buy a new chemistry set.

So is it any wonder Graham tires of this lot and decides to turn his talents to becoming the "world's greatest poisoner?"

To give away more plot would to do this extraordinarily crafted Brit import a severe injustice. Alternating between pitch black comedy and a sort of arty/cranky soap opera, director Ross uses giddy misanthropy to address a number of nasty-ass human verities -- greed, madness, bad hair-styles and worse.

When asked why he made the film, Ross said he was sick to death of treachy Hollywood product, and simply wanted to "make a feel-bad film".

He succeeds in spades. But after the last sage chuckle at the on-screen human monstrosities fades, we are face with the film's uncomfotting "message."

That we are the monsters.

Or as the old New Waver wheezed: "Same as it ever was."

Ω

*Ian Grey has published film essays and reviews in Laconian Ink, Breuklyn, and Fangoria magazines, usually concentrating on the darker regions of pop culture. This year will see the release of Seen That, What Now? (Simon & Schuster), a video-guide co-edited by Grey for which he reviewed several thousand noir, horror and "fringe"-cinema features. He can be reached via renn@echonyc.com.*



**G**et closer," Angela whispered into his ear. "I can't get close enough to you."

Hugh groaned with pleasure. "If I were any closer I'd be crawling around inside your skin."

That would be heaven ..." she murmured, and then was silent for a time, so that he thought she might have actually drifted off to sleep. He shifted his hips a little and felt himself move inside her, and she in turn contracting, holding on. The hidden gesture embarrassed him a little, which surprised him.

"I've always wanted to make that closeness happen," she said. "Maybe if we try hard enough we can make that happen."

He didn't say anything more. That last thing... she was being serious. He felt great that she'd said that. He had the same desire, after all. That was the point, wasn't it? Getting so close there's no difference between the two of you. It was a wonderful idea, and yet strangely frightening. Hugh was suddenly cold, and tried to pull Angela even closer.

"Do you love my body?" she asked him a few weeks later.

"Of course I do. It's a wonderful body."

"I don't mean like it, the way you like to have sex with it, put your penis inside it. I mean, do you love it? As in you can't be without it. As in you need its physical presence around you at all times. As if it were music. As if it were air."

"Angela. I adore your body."

"How much do you adore it?"

"I go to bed and your body is the bed. I go to sleep and your body is the dream. The smell of it is my oxygen. The taste of your skin on my lips is breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In fact, I don't want you to bathe anymore. I want you to ripen, I want the taste of you to change, to diversify. The flavor of you should be a varied menu. For there could be no foulness about you, only a difference in tastes, as if I were travelling around the world of you and tasting every exotic cuisine of you." Hugh was a little breathless.

She made an exaggerated sigh. "My, my! Tell me more."

"I never want to leave this room again. I want to swim in you, drink in you, eat in you, work in you, live in you."

"So what do we do for money?"

He paused. "Well, so much for that idea." They laughed, and made love until dawn.

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"It's been wonderful," she whispered from the darkness. "But I can't help thinking, it could be more."

"You're getting bored with me?"

"Oh, no. No, my love. Never. After all these months it's still beautiful, as special as that first time. But don't you feel the same way sometimes? That there could always be more? That we could be even closer? All my life, I've never been able to get close enough, but I always thought if I just met the right person, and we tried, really tried, I finally would."

The words inside his mouth felt like her words. They had the same softness, the same strength. "And you'd be looking out of my eyes, and I'd be looking out of yours, and neither one of us would be alone ever again."

Angela came out of the dark and wrapped herself around him. The surface of her skin had a cool distance at first, but as it warmed to his skin it was as if she were adhering to him, sinking into his body. He rubbed his open hands and his forearms up and down her back, and for a moment it was as if he were rubbing himself. He could feel the friction of his own contact, and it spread the warmth throughout his body, but then there was the harshest sensation of panic when he tried to pull away from her just a hit, to break the sweat adhesion of their bodies, just to make himself a little more comfortable, and found that he couldn't. Couldn't remove himself from her. He had lost the sense of an edge to his own skin, where it connected to her, and the way her arms and legs had wrapped around his so tightly it seemed she had sprouted more arms and legs somehow, and she had climbed up onto him so that he held her up completely, and she was so light she seemed not to have added an ounce to his own weight.

"Closer ... closer," she whispered, her voice inside his head.

He had been talking all evening, barely above a whisper, so that for nearly anyone else he'd be nearly impossible to hear. But he was convinced she heard every word, even though she had said nothing in reply. He wasn't sure what he was trying to do: convince her, reason with her, balance the fantasy with some hard facts about the limitations inherent in human flesh. He made no arguments, no assertions, but rambled all night long, lulling himself, seducing himself, reacquainting himself with those realities.

"To see out of your eyes. To breathe what you breathe, taste what you taste. I think everyone wants that, to be so close, but it's a dream, isn't it? I mean, human beings aren't made that way. That's why we're such a sad

hunch: what we desire most in our lives is impossible because of our very nature. And we can't push past our own physical natures. Can we?"

The question hung in the darkness between them until morning.

For a week they left the bed only to use the bathroom or grab something from the kitchen, take it back to the bed, feed themselves, feed each other, smearing each other with whatever was soft enough to mash and spread, licking it from skin, nibbling it off smooth rises, chewing it out of hollows. After another week they made calls to the stores, paid by credit card, and had food delivered in boxes by the front door, sneaking out when they thought no one else could see, because they didn't want to share their nakedness with anyone else. Or perhaps, he thought, they were too embarrassed about the way they looked now, the way they smelled, the rawness about them.

"Hu ... hu ... Hugh! Can't breathe!"

He heard the fear in her muffled voice, but he was too tired, or too reluctant, to move his mouth away from hers, even though his own lips hurt, his throat was a deep well of pain, and he thought maybe his gums were bleeding. Certainly he tasted blood almost all the time now, every kiss highlighted with it.

"Hugh!" She exploded out from under him. In desperation or orgasm he could not tell, nor did he think there was much difference for them anymore. She sat on the edge of the bed, face in her hands, shaking. He started to rub her back. The skin wrinkled, reddened. She made a small cry and edged away. "I ... I can't ... kiss you anymore. It *hurts!*" She said it angrily.

"I'm sorry, I should have stopped."

"No, no honey." She twisted around and clutched his hand. He noticed that the back of her hand was red, skinned, beginning to break down. "I like, or, no, I want it. I really do. Maybe just a little rest."

She lay down next to him and they were careful not to touch at first. Her breath came in short, ragged explosions, with occasional tears. He reached out cautiously, one finger pressing gently into the side of her hand. She laid her hand on top of his. After a while he couldn't bear her breathing anymore. He rose on one elbow and twisted his head toward her. Her hand didn't move. He stared hard at her chest, her throat. The skin looked pebbled, abraded, a faint trace of scabbing beginning to show. He couldn't see her breathing. He moved over her, straddled her. He laid one hand on her shoulder and shook it gently. Nothing. He looked down at her pubic hair, the extensive swelling of the labia, the dried pink line. His penis began to swell. He thought it might hurt to put his penis inside her, she would be so dry. He bent over to kiss one nipple, and still she did not move.

"Angela! Angela!" he screamed. Her eyelids shot open. She started to cry, and he kissed each one of the tears, tasting them, lifting them with his tongue.

"Angela..." He entered her name into the air as she guided him into her.

They could move only for short, vigorous periods. They rested for an hour or so between tries, always pressed together, their skin painful to the touch, but so painful not to touch. The fire of pain was a part of them both and could not be isolated. The sex was strong and desperate both inside and outside their dry, flaking skins. He entered her wherever he could find an opening, but there were never enough openings to get all of him inside.

"I want you closer," she pleaded again and again, but her mouth seemed mishapen, the words malformed, although he understood everything she said. "I can't get...inside you," she said and beat her fist against his chest in one spot over and over as if to force an opening.

When he woke up she had a kitchen knife in her hand, moving it back and forth across her tongue. He looked down at his belly. She'd started building a hole there. Not "making," he thought. More than that. *Building*. She was building a bridge between them.

He suddenly wanted to urinate, but he couldn't get up. He couldn't remove her mouth and tongue from him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone to the bathroom. But he knew he had. He couldn't remember the last time he had left this bed.

And perhaps he hadn't.

"We animals, we worship meat. We worship our food," he said. "It brings us back to where we came from, and after such a long, lonely journey."

She had her tongue in the hole. She looked as if she were trying to get her entire head in there. He wanted to tell her that she couldn't, that it wouldn't work. A physical impossibility for human beings. He wanted to be the voice of reason again. For her. He thought she needed it. His life, his body had no more room for reason.

After a time he opened his eyes. She was covered with him.

"Close to you ... close to you ..." she murmured. She tasted just like him. He thought it must be the taste of her that kept waking him up.

He woke up again. "Close to you," she repeated. She kept jabbing him to wake him up. It hurt. She kept putting her finger into his hand. "Here," she said. Her sharp finger. He looked down at the knife in his hand. "Here," she said again. She pulled his head down until he could see the pubic hair. He tasted himself. "Here." She drew a line down from her pubic hair, down from her vagina. "They do it so babies can come out easier. 'Episiotomy,' they call it. So babies can come out. And never go back. Not ever."

Dully he looked at her. He just wanted to lie down. Inside her.

"Here," she said. "Here." And helped him guide the knife.



*Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in  
to the power of the music that I write  
the power of the music of the night?*

-Andrew Lloyd Webber/ Tim Rice, 1987

*They used to dance in the garden in the middle of the night  
they were naked as the day they were born  
skin all bone-china white  
O you were a vampire and I may never see the light*

-Concrete Blonde, 1990

*Take the skin and peel it back  
now doesn't that make you feel better?  
...the pigs have won tonight  
now they can all sleep soundly  
and everything is all right*

-Nine Inch Nails, 1994

The music of the night comes in many guises. *NightSongs* are seductive as a slender succubus, singing sweetly of dark decay, waiting for that moment of your acceptance, your trust, your aural orgasm. Then the music is a mantis, biting off your head with a spray of bitter venom and quickly cooling blood. You're caught, you're killed. And you'll keep coming back for more.

The music of the night is goth, industrial, alternative, ballad, middle eastern. It exists in tiny bars in Dusktown, USA and it blares from the amplifiers at Wembley stadium. *NightSongs* know no genre boundaries. They live to feed on your soul. They are Tori Amos recounting rape and the death of dreams. They are This Mortal Coil's ethereal weaving of tape loops and unspecific sorrow. The music of the night lives in the angst of a mosh and the mesmerizing twine of a druid dance. In this column I will dive into the blasted pits of its excess and wade in the black syrup of its cloyingly attractive deception.

*NightSongs* are the blackest dreams of our communal nightmare.

Taste the blood. Catch the scent of the other side through the cool fog of dry ice.

Listen closely.

## The Changelings

(Middlesex)

~~~~~ (4 Bones)

In the *Music To Hold A Seance To* category we get The Changelings' self-titled album. The Atlanta band's debut on Middlesex came out in May, and features an intoxicating blend of somber, instrumental violin with a hypnotic stomp of percussion, guitars, keys and female trance chanting. Working in the same school as Dead Can Dance (but with a more enchanting darkness), Regeana Morris' sensual, mysterious vocals are simply spellbinding. Like Cocteau Twins' Elizabeth Fraser, her lyrics are often incomprehensible, but with The Changelings, it's the feel that matters. And the feel here breathes of the night call of the crypt, and of secret dances at the altars of ancient stone. (This independent release may not be easily available in your local record store. Write to P.O. Box 5583, Atlanta, GA., 31107, or check out their web site at <http://www.mindspring.com/~MKinsey/changelings/home.html>)

## Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

*Murder Ballads*

(Mute/Reprise)

~~~~~ (3.5 Bones)

Nick Cave has made a career out of singing about the shadowed corners of the human heart. His latest album puts a gold-gilt Golgotha frame around the crimson-stained hands of murderers. Each of the 10 tracks here paint the portraits of "murder most foul," and most, in thoroughly twisted fashion, are told from the point of view of the murderer through Cave's creepy bass timbre. A handful of these songs are traditional ballads, their bloody tales amplified by the Bad Seeds' edgy arrangements and Cave's hellish delivery. Others were written in old-fashioned ballad format by Cave himself.

The opening dirge is a Cave original, "Song of Joy," in which a cold homeless man recounts the stabbing deaths of his family while begging shelter for the night. The song cleverly leaves the listener wondering if the growling narrator is, himself, the serial killer of the tale who quotes Milton on walls with his victims' blood. Will the listener let him in?

P.J. Harvey joins Cave on "Henry Lee," a traditional ballad about a woman with some real claws -- she kills a man that won't have her, rather than letting him go back to the girl he loves.

But the album's true bloody gems are "Where The Wild Roses Grow" and "The Curse of Millhaven."

In "Where the Wild Roses Grow," Cave cannily draws in Australian pop queen Kylie Minogue to lend a heavenly voice to the warped tale of a man whose mother told him "all beauty must die." Cave and Minogue trade off lyrics recounting their courtship and his "necessary" murder of her beauty, atop a bittersweet arrangement of strings and piano.

In "The Curse of Millhaven," Cave spins a blackly humorous, frenetic tale of a teenage psychopath named Loretta, who has a similar problem to that of the murderer in "Where the Wild Roses Grow." She recalls that: "Mama often told me we all have to die." Over a punchy, carny organ and skewed polka beat, Cave, as Loretta, brags of multiple murders with glee:

A lot of people were saying things that made little sense  
Then the next thing you know the head of Handyman Joe  
Was found in the fountain of the Mayor's residence  
Foul play can really get a small town going

la la la la, la la la lie  
All God's children all have to die."

There's a military beat-driven hymn to a Mary Bellows, who did not find long life as a benefit of "The Kindness of Strangers," a violent, R-rated run-through of the traditional "Stagger Lee," and a step-by-step recounting of the cold-blooded murders in "O'Malley's Bar" that, at 14 minutes, stretches the limits of listener patience somewhat. ("O'Malley's Bar" was a song that wouldn't fit on a "normal" Cave album, however, and became the impetus for recording a whole album of *Murder Ballads*.) The album is capped off in darkly wry Cave fashion with a "punchline:" a foreboding, piano-driven version of Bob Dylan's "Death Is Not the End," on which Cave is joined by Minogue, Harvey and ex-Pogue Shane MacGowan.

#### Download

*The Eyes of Stanley Pain*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ (3 Bones)

**Skinny Puppy**

*Brap*

~ ~ ~ (2 Bones)

(Nettwerk)

Released this spring at the same time as a housecleaning two-disc collection of old Skinny Puppy demos (*Brap*.) *The Eyes of Stanley Pain* is a natural extension of Canada's prototypical industrial dance band. Featuring cEvin Key and Ken Marshall of Skinny Puppy, Download listens like a cyber passion play of hellish sounds and percolating pain. Thumping bass and drum machine rhythms underscore twisted, maniacal processed vocals (this is how demons sound when they speak, isn't it?) The old Skinny Puppy fondness for grafting newsbites atop frantic synth tracks on *Brap* sounds dated next to the complex sonic explosions of Download. Intense and challenging, *The Eyes of Stanley Pain* is a mind-numbing headphone album. Put it on, let it eat away at the synapses between the ears. And then, as the bombs fall, the blood boils, the synthesizers flutter and the demons cavort amid the destruction, you may see with *The Eyes of Stanley Pain*.

Don't blink.

Various Artists

*Home Alive: The Art of Self Defense*

(Epic)

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ (4 Bones)

If some music romanticizes the call of the dark and the dank breath of death, this compilation paints death and brutality in a blood-and-uncoled bowel realism that is both frightening and, in its own way, alluring. *Home Alive* is a benefit album that was released early this year on the theme of violence against women. Its songs and spoken word pieces take on the brutality of the street and the home in a confrontational and effective burst of sonic energy. A two-CD set, it includes a horde of well-known Seattle bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, The Presidents of the United States of America, Soundgarden, The Posies and Heart's Ann & Nancy Wilson. There are also a slew of lesser known punkish outfits, including The Gits and Mia Zapata, the former lead singer of The Gits who was raped and killed in 1993. The album was

masterminded in part by her former bandmates. The most intense tracks on *Home Alive* actually come, not from the punk and grunge rockers, but from performance artists. Spoken word pieces that range from the sadly humorous to the grittily frightening are scattered throughout the set from artists like Jello Biafra, Jim Carroll, Lydia Lunch and more. These often chilling poem-stories about rape, violence and misogyny are more riveting than most horror fiction and are sometimes difficult to listen to due to their frightening depth of emotions.

Martha Linehan's "Mary's Poem" is a rape recount that is more gut twisting in its realism than the grimmest serial killer fiction I've read:

*This is Texas, could be anywhere I suppose, but I live here. This is my apartment. My room. My world. This is my bed. This is no longer my body though. This is not me. He is raping her. Then he will kill her, just like he said. I am speaking through her stomach. I can see him through her navel. I am her twin. Her nails cannot break the skin; hands bound with rope he found right on the porch. Her gagged mouth cannot scream. Blindfolded, she will never know what he looks like. But she'll imagine for a long, long time that every man is him.*

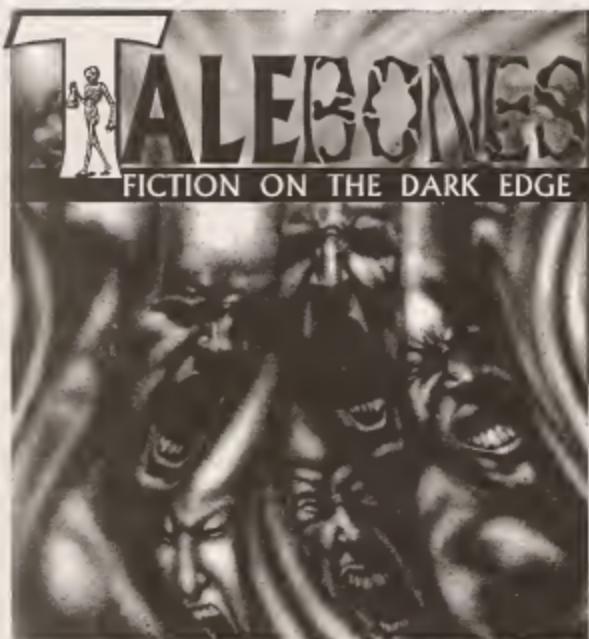
The messages of *Home Alive* should be heard by everyone, of both sexes. Some horrors should exist only in fiction.

That's all for this issue. Keep listening. The heart of *NightSongs* beats hardest in the dark.

Ω

Everson has been a music critic, reviewer, editor and writer for a decade in addition to writing horror fiction published in magazines including *Into the Darkness*, *Terminal Fright* and *Dead of Night*.

He can be reached in the depths of the night via e-mail at [jjenet@aol.com](mailto:jjenet@aol.com).



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# REMEMBERING WHAT HE WAS

Yvonne Navarro

**Y**ou're late," she says. She's getting dressed to go out.

"Take off your clothes, bitch." He's so nervous that spittle flies from his lips. A droplet catches on the serrated edge of the knife in his hand and twinkles before it drops to the carpet and soaks in.

"There's no time," she snaps. Her dress is a velvet scrap of backless material held over the shoulders by the spaghetti straps. He can see her reflection in the mirror, the way the fabric dips between the swell of perfect breasts. She is tall and slender and looks like one of those super models. "We have to leave in an hour."

"Don't move," he warns. She is reaching for her jewelry box and he shouldn't let her do that. She's just the type to have one of those tiny guns hidden in it, like the prissy derringers that he sees on the corner mystery movies. He isn't swift enough to stop her but she pulls out only a pair of earrings, gold filigree hoops, and begins putting them on. They're real, he notes with satisfaction. He will get a load of stuff from this bouse to bring to his fence. He gestures at her impatiently with the knife. "I told you to take off your fucking clothes," he snarls. "Or maybe I should cut them off."

"We'll have to do this later," she says. "You aren't even dressed."

He's confused, but only for a moment. His eyes narrow as he stares at the woman. She isn't afraid, isn't even watching him in the mirror. It's a game, he thinks suddenly, one with new rules. What the hell, he decides, I'll bite. As long as I've got the knife, I can play. At first he doesn't know what to say, then he just... falls into the role. He's one of society's natural-born actors, a thief and a murderer, and nothing is easier than role-playing. He's done a lot of things but never before gone into someone's bouse intentionally, like this one, scoped it out and waited for the owner to be there like this time, just because she was hot. Still, he feels okay about it, like he's rehearsed it a million times, and besides, he's bored and up for something new, beyond the ordinary run of excitement. It will make a good story to tell his best buddy over a six-pack of beer.

"Where are my clothes?" he asks. He lowers the knife slightly but does not put it away. She looks at him reproachfully and he almost slaps her, then remembers again that it's a game and she's probably just acting out her role.

"Where they always are," she answers, "in the closet in the other bedroom."

Uh-huh, he thinks, this is where I come back and she pulls out a piece and blows me away. No fucking way. "Show me." It's not a request and she doesn't argue; her expression is one of exasperated patience, like a teacher showing a slow child for the tenth time where the crayons are kept.

"I have to do everything," she says testily. "Can't you see I still have to do my hair?"



"It looks fine like it is."

She sighs and steps in front of him like the knife isn't there; he wants to reach out and poke her a little with it, see if the rules in the game will make her bleed a different color. But he's starting to like this game and he's afraid if she starts screaming it will disqualify him and ruin everything. There's a lot to be said for playing house in this four hundred thousand dollar suburban home. Instead of cutting her, he follows her cautiously out of the master bedroom; three steps out and to the left is another large bedroom in which she opens a sliding mirrored door to reveal a closet full of men's clothes. The nervousness returns abruptly. Who owns these duds? Her husband? A boyfriend or brother? No matter, just another game player that he will eliminate when the time comes, like the pieces in a game of Checkers.

"Here," she says.

The contents of the closet beckon and he is mesmerized for a few moments; he's never seen so many suits and shirts, all tailored, all more expensive than anything he's ever hoped to wear. When he comes back to his senses she is still standing beside him, watching him warily. "What?" he demands. "What the hell are you staring at?"

"Nothing," she says. Her tone is sullen, as if it pisses her off that he has raised his voice. Tough shit, he thinks. If she gives me a hard time, I'll kill her right now. I don't have to play -- I can quit any time. "Wear whatever you want. Just make sure it's dressy."

She turns and stalks out and he starts to follow, then changes his mind and waits until she's all the way out of the room until he sidles to the door and peers around the jamb. He thinks she will be at the telephone by now, picking it up and dialing 911. She is back by the mirror instead, pulling a wide-toothed pearl-handled comb through her hair with fine, sexy strokes. Her hair is a lush auburn color, shoulder-length with thick curls on the ends, a modernized version of a sixties flip. It makes her pale skin look translucent, like the thin outer layer of a Spanish onion; fragile veins weave beneath its surface and invite the kiss of his knife, the rawer feel of his teeth.

He returns to the closet in a rush and grabs the first thing his hand grazes, a fancy suit made of some kind of blended hue fabric. The tag at the collar says Armani. The shirt and tie are trickier and he goes for white silk and a splashy floral tie; he doesn't have a clue if the tie will match, or even how to put it on.

"How's this?" he asks as he steps into the master bedroom.

She looks at the ensemble and a frown line appears between her eyebrows as she sees the red and purple rosettes on the Giorgio tie.

"Not that one," she says. He hears a touch of impatience in her voice, but he is too busy trying to hold up the suit and shirt by their hangers -- his hands are dirty -- to do anything about it. She slides the tie off the shirt and tosses it on the bed, then leaves him standing there like a human clothesrack while she goes into the other bedroom and selects a different one. The tie she brings back is silk, like the shirt, with tiny abstract blue forms on a white-on-white patterned background. It is a perfect match and he wishes he had seen it first.

"Let me take this," she says. She pulls the two hangers from his sweating fingers and hooks them over the top of the armoire, then looks him up and down. Her expression is sour and makes him feel like a piece of meat with flies on it. "You need a shower," she says. "You can't go looking like that."

He stares at her, wondering if he should risk it. "Where's the bathroom?" he finally asks.

She nods at a door on the other side of the armoire. "Through there." She goes back to combing her hair with the same provocative strokes and he reaches to touch it, gets his hand smacked for his trouble. "Take your shower first." In retaliation he raises his fist to her face; she is frightened, but pushes it aside and stares at him. "Are you going to shower or not?"

"Fine," he snaps. He yanks open the door hard enough to make it slam against the bedroom wall, then gapes at the opulence of the bathroom. The floor is done in red and gold

swirled ceramic tile that carries halfway up the wall and encircles a whirlpool tub. At the far end of the oversized room is a shower stall made entirely of glass blocks and lit from within. Two huge plush towels and washcloths hang from a brass towel rack by its entrance.

He strips off his clothes and drops them in a pile on the floor; they are grimy and worn, jeans thin at the knees and the butt, outright holes in the elbow of the faded flannel shirt he bought for a quarter last year at the Salvation Army Store. His cheap tennis shoes are gray with dirt and age, the canvas starting to split along the outer edges from the pressure of his little toes. He doesn't have socks or underwear and the pathetic pile of stained fabric looks out of place against the richly-colored floor tile. He thinks about it for a moment and climbs into the shower, leaving his victim with free rein in the house. Maybe she is calling the police, maybe she is pulling a box that holds a chromed and loaded .357 from a back shelf in the closet. The cops may come and drag him from the



shower, and then he will be in more shit than he's ever known; he has a record of breaking and entering, but nothing while carrying a weapon--because he knew that was a felony, he always picked up something from the kitchen after he got inside. This time he brought his favorite blade with him. There is also the possibility that the woman is waiting for him with a weapon, but she seems too intelligent to do that. If she bows out of the game now and for some reason decides not to call for the cops, he thinks it is more likely that she will simply leave the house before he shuts off the water.

He wants to believe that he is not being stupid so much as being daring, but it is difficult. He does not want to get caught, but more than that, he does not want the woman to get away. He has been watching her for a long time, driving by the house at odd times, careful not to make a pattern that the local cop shop or that fucking Neighborhood Watch program could pick up. The house is a beauty and backs up to the forest preserve; when he is through with his business here, he will slip into the trees like a nightshadow.

He allows himself the luxury of a quick soap and rinse, the kind that he used to take in reform school when staying naked in the showers was asking for it, then turns the water to full force and lets its roar mask the sound of the shower door opening. Slapping water on the floor, he slips out and pads across the bathroom, eases out the doorway and into the master bedroom. She is standing by the nightstand next to the bed. Her back is to him and she is on the telephone.

She whirls and sees him, slams the phone down and backs up as he grabs for her hair and gets one of the thin straps to her dress instead. He tries to yank her forward and the strap breaks. The right side of the dress collapses and falls, exposing a creamy round breast. She is not wearing a bra.

"You're dripping on the carpet!" she says shakily. A valiant try at keeping the game going, but not good enough; when she reaches to lift the flap of the dress his hands snakes out and catches her wrist, squeezing until her fingers are forced open and the material drops away. "I can fix this," she begins. "I--"

"Who did you call?" he demands. He wrenches her forward and she stumbles against him, the still-warm water on his naked skin soaking into the velvet dress, the pounding of the shower far away. He decides he will change the game and speed things up more to his own tastes; he's tired of her rules. She struggles against him and this time he does slap her, but lightly, because he will want to kiss her in a few moments and he doesn't like the taste of blood. She cries out softly and he draws the other

side of the dress down to her waist and pushes her back on the bed, falls on top of her.

"Stop it!" she protests. "You're ruining everything! My dress, the comforter--"

"Shut up," he snarls. "You talk too fucking much!" He covers her mouth in a savage kiss. The dress is made of some kind of stretchy stuff and does not rip when he hauls it down past her hips. Her body is beautiful and he takes her on top of the comforter, not caring that she is crying, only that it feels good. Nestled within her body and midway to orgasm he realizes that she is holding him tightly, her fingernails digging sensuously into the flesh of his back as she moves with him. He knows when she comes, feels her insides tighten around him as she moans. He grins to himself and keeps going, searching for his own dark pleasure.

The shower runs for a long time.

**He covers her mouth in a savage kiss. The dress is made of some kind of stretchy stuff and does not rip when he hauls it down past her hips. Her body is beautiful and he takes her on top of the comforter, not caring that she is crying, only that it feels good.**

Later, when he is done, he makes her go to the kitchen and fix him something to eat. There are two strip steaks on a plate in the refrigerator and he wonders again if she was expecting company, thinks about the clothes in the closet of the second bedroom. He remembers her telephone call but that was hours ago and nothing has happened, so he decides that it doesn't matter and forgets about it.

"I'm cold," she complains. She has been moving around the kitchen in nothing but a silk and lace nightshirt he found hanging on the back of the bedroom door.

"So think warm thoughts," he retorts. He opens the refrigerator and finds a bottle of wine on its side on the bottom shelf, some sort of German red

that he can't pronounce. He pulls it out and opens the drawer nearest the fridge experimentally; jackpot -- there is a corkscrew right there. He fights with the cork until he gets it out, then grabs an oversized black mug from one of the cabinets.

"You'll get a headache."

"Who asked you?" he growls. "Here," he snatches another cup from the cabinet. "Drink some." He sloshes wine into it and shoves it toward her.

"I don't drink."

"Now you do." She shakes her head but he hooks a hand behind her neck before she can twist away and pulls her forward. She does not resist until he presses the rim of the ceramic mug roughly against her mouth.

"No!"

"Drink it," he demands. He tilts the mug and tries to force the dark liquid into her mouth, succeeds only in splashing it across her face and down the front of the pretty nightshirt. The paintbrush design it leaves reminds him of

a wash of blood and makes him want to turn away, although he doesn't know why.

"I can't," she says. "It will make me vomit." Night has fallen and he has kept the light in the kitchen to a minimum; her face is a white oval with wide, dark eyes floating above the red-stained nightshirt.

"Fine," he says sullenly. "More for me." He lifts the mug to his lips once more and drinks defiantly, squelching the sudden desire to gag as the strong taste of alcohol makes his mouth pucker.

"You'll get a headache," she says again. He lowers the mug and scowls at her and she shrugs and turns to check on the steaks under the broiler. When they are done, she puts them on two plates and adds a quickly microwaved pair of potatoes and a small salad with expensive blue cheese dressing. He starts to tell her he wants parmesan cheese on his potato but she already has the container in her hand and offers it to him. The meal is simple but very good, and he relishes it and washes it down with generous sips of wine. She picks at her food as if she is tired of it.

"You should be grateful you have food on your table," he tells her, talking with his mouth full. He waves his fork and knife, his own rather than one of the steak knives she set by the plates. "When I was a boy we had almost nothing. My mother was by herself and on welfare. I used to steal boxes of macaroni and cheese from the supermarket." She glares at him and opens her mouth, then shrugs and decides not to argue. He is beginning to find that little movement of her shoulders annoying.

The wine and food have not dulled his desire and he makes her leave the dishes where they are and go into the bedroom again. With the half-full bottle of wine and filled mug on the night table, he gives her exact instructions about what to do and how to do it; she follows them to the letter and in the fleeting moments of coherent thought between his shudders of pleasure, he is impressed with her skill and amazed at her willingness. By the time he empties the last of the wine into the mug, his head has started to throb nastily and he is nearly done physically. He uses his last energy to flip her on her stomach and take her, gripping her by each wrist and pulling her arms above her head so he can feel the length of her lean back under the muscles of his chest and stomach, moving hard against her. Finally, at the end of his endurance, she cries out, but he can tell it is not a scream of pain but of ecstasy.

He falls off her and lets the wine take him, and although the clock on the nightstand says only eleven P.M., he drifts into alcoholic sleep in the arms of a slow bedspin.

He wakes at four in the morning and opens his eyes without thinking. Except for a sliver of light that leaks through the heavy drapes at the window, the room is as black as the shadows in the forest preserve into which he intends to disappear later today. The light leak is tiny but enough to send the headache rippling through his eyes,

his temples, circling around the back of his skull to crush it in a grip of pain. He sits up and lets his feet fall to the floor only because he has to use the bathroom desperately and cannot bear the thought of soiling himself in bed like an old person. The heavy thump of his feet on the floor makes the woman sleeping beside him mumble into her pillow and turn over, but he does not care about the noise he makes as he stands and tries to orient himself enough to find the bathroom. The remnants of last night's alcohol makes his balance as dependable as the bohthing head on one of those toy dogs people always put in the back windows of their cars; he knocks over something in the bathroom -- a soap dish -- but it is plastic and does not break. Funny, he would have expected a classy dame like his victim to have better stuff than that.

He wobbles back to the bed and collapses onto the wadded up mass of sheets and down comforter, feeling the woman's touch as she wakes and covers him, then strokes the hair back from his forehead. He wants to tell her to stop, that it hurts his head too much. He wants to kill her and get it over with, too, but the wine is a stronger opponent and he loses the battle, whirling back into oblivion with the sour taste of German red congealed on his teeth and tongue.

It is the alarm which wakes him in the morning. Loud and vicious, he thinks for a moment that someone is running a chainsaw at the foot of the bed. The impression is short lived, lost on the tidal wave of pain that explodes behind his eyes as he tries to hammer the sound away with his fist. The woman is there instead, nimble fingers hitting



a button somewhere on the clock, silencing it with the same abrupt power that he will use later on to quiet her forever. He should do it now, before the things that normally happen each day in her life interfere and make his chore complicated, but when he tries to move the pain in his head is a living thing and makes him think of beasts with wine-laced teeth, hot breath and claws that pierce his brain.

His eyes open against his will and he sees the woman, sitting on the side of the bed and looking at him with an odd expression on her face, a vague sort of hope. He closes them again, trying to shut out the vicious daylight that now bleeds all the way around the edges of the drapes and feeds the raging monster inside his skull.

"It's time to get up," she says softly. Her hand is warm against the skin of his arm, rushing lightly across the hair and he wants it to stop, he wants it to keep going, he doesn't know what he wants besides a bottle of aspirin. "You have to go to work now." It is half a statement and half a question.

Again his lids open and he squints at her. He has a choice between shaking his head -- instant agony -- and speaking, and he chooses to make his vocal cords work instead, forcing them to clear and form an understandable statement. "I can't," he manages to whisper. His voice sounds like a rusty propeller. "I have a headache."

Her face crumples suddenly, tears spilling down her cheeks. Her nose reddens like a baby's and he feels sad that he has disappointed her. But what can he do? It is only a game and now his head hurts too much to continue. It is the wine that has made him feel so nasty and ugly-tempered, and in spite of his contrition he knows that if she wakes him again before the torment in his skull goes away he really will kill her and be done with it.

"Please?" Her voice is blatantly desperate but he doesn't care.

"No." He closes his eyes again and shuts out the sight of her, ignores the tears that are sliding down her cheeks to drip onto her collarbone. Her pleading face is that of a bewildered little girl whose playmate has gone away. "I don't want to play anymore."

He lets himself skid back into sleep, telling himself with a fading thought that it is a conscious choice; deep within the hellhole of pain his mind has become he knows that the blackness closing over him is really unconsciousness.

"How far did he get this time?" the doctor asks. He is in his forties and balding already; secretly he wishes he had as much hair as the patient he has shot up with Valium and who sits quietly in the waiting room.

The woman shrugs. "As far as he always does." "Work?"

She nods. "It's as if his brain misfires at that point. Maybe subconsciously he knows there is no job for him to go to anymore," she says softly.

The doctor leans back and chews on the eraser end of his pencil, but not so much that he ends up with little pieces in his mouth. Then he would have to spit and that would be impolite. "He can't know that. His company put him on permanent mental disability after he became ill, not before."

She shrugs again. "Maybe he picks up more in the real world than we realize, like a patient in a coma who hears the conversations of people who visit." She looks at her hands but her eyes are not focused on her fingers. She picks at a hangnail and the movement is dejected, hopeless.

The doctor wonders not for the first time if she will be his next patient.

"Why do we have to keep replaying the same scene?" she asks in a low voice. "We've been doing this for... so long. It's not working."

"It will," the doctor says simply. "You just have to be stubborn about it. You said yourself that this time he'd fallen into the comfortable mode by the time he finished his shower and got dressed. Last time he dragged you into the guest bedroom and punched you when you told him where his clothes were." He gazes at her levelly. "Keep trying. If we can get him back to the point where he walks into the house without a knife, we've got the springboard we need to bypass the imagined persona."

"You did this," she said. Her voice sharpens with her bitterness and her gaze is no longer far away but razored on him. "You and your so-called suppressed memory therapy."

The doctor spreads his hands. "Who could have known it would backfire like this? He was having dreams and came to me for help. It's a new procedure -- he signed the papers agreeing to the risks."

"I don't give a damn about your releases and your indemnifications. We both know they're not worth the pulp and ink it took to make them. I want my husband back, not this man who thinks he's a murderer but never was."

"We're working on it," the doctor says in his most soothing voice. "A little time, a couple more tries, and we'll get there, you'll see." He glances at his watch, the stereotypical symbol that the hour is up. The gesture makes her want to gouge his eyes out, just as he has gouged out her husband's sanity. "Just take him home and don't give up."

The door opens behind her as if a secret bell has gone off in another room and the woman plucks her purse from the other chair and stands without bothering to say goodbye. Waiting in the doorway is the doctor's nurse, in a smock so white it makes the nurse look deeply tanned and hurts the woman's eyes to boot. Silently leaning on the nurse's arm is the woman's smiling, dreamy-eyed husband.

"You're late," she says. She's getting dressed to go out again.



I highly recommend indulging in the many sinful delights available on the World Wide Web. With a healthy, if perverse, appetite and a few clicks of your mouse, a decadent onslaught of words and images will materialize right before your bloodshot eyes. Using the Internet in the relative safety of your own home can release the nefarious explorer inside you to begin a delightfully detrimental journey of putrescence and malevolence.

Want to see step by step pictures of genital piercings? Check out **Body Modification E-Zine** (<http://www.io.org/~bma/>). How about photos of **Slovakian Bone Structures** (<http://www.paranoia.com/~caligari/bones.html>)? Are you into **Psycho Baby Art** (<http://caprec.com/Megadeth/Baby/baby.html>)? View these perverse fruits of Greg Weber's sick mind at his site. Almost anything you can think of is out there for you to feast on.

The editor of **BONES** gave me the job of searching for horrific gems in cyberspace, so I suggest we start with a search engine like **Alta Vista** (<http://altavista.digital.com/>) where you have access to eleven billion words found in twenty-two million web pages. **Yahoo** (<http://www.yahoo.com/>) is useful too, but way too cuts for my taste. You can be as vague or specific as you want with **Alta Vista**. For instance, I decided to do a search for "horror." A few seconds later a list of 60,000 sites appeared on my screen. Realizing I needed to be a bit more specific, I entered "extreme horror" into the search box. This time the result was something I could work with: 41 matches.

The list included a site called **Dark Side Of The Web** (<http://www.cascade.net/darkweb.html>). This is a great place for horror entertainment in all of its forms and sub-genera. You can easily become addicted to this murky place since Webmaster Carrie Carolin is constantly adding new links. Over 1,300 sites are broken down into categories like Apparitions and Crucifixes, Cemeteries, Funeral Homes, Miscellaneous Dark Resources, Paranormal, Role Playing Games, Vampires and Dark Zines and Magazines.

I decided to check out the gothic section of Carrie's site in which the first one to catch my eye was the **Gothic Babe Of The Week** page (<http://users1.ee.net/z/gothbabe.html>). I never imagined something like this existed. I, of course, sought to learn more about these black-clad gothic girls with dark sexy photos, surprisingly conservative bios and links to their individual homepages. I particularly liked **Erika** (<http://rinfo.its.rpi.edu:80/~gillme/>) who is a fourth-year architecture student in Albany. (She'll probably be a graduate by the time you read this.) I emailed her congratulations in advance. I made a note that I should enter "gothic babes" as an Alta Vista search parameter later.

The next one I checked out was Net Goths (<http://netrunner.net/~neo/goth.people.html>.) This is a huge directory listing of who is both gothic and online broken down by state and country. The biggest concentrations of goths fall in New York and Florida.

I decided to head back to the Dark Side Of The Web and see which sites are listed in the New This Month Section. Here I couldn't resist the one titled RATE YOUR RISK OF BEING MURDERED (<http://www.Nashville.Net/~police/risk/murder.html>.) The test was developed by the Metro Nashville Police Department and lets you rate your actual risk of being murdered. (By the way, they also have a test for your chances of being raped and robbed.) I took this test of about 50 yes/no questions asking mainly about my daily routines and habits and scored a 78 which puts me in the Moderate Risk category. (I fell 2 points shy of the High Risk category.) I was advised to alter my schedule, traveling techniques and to cut down on my public exposure. (Maybe being a columnist here at BONES isn't such a good idea.)

Oddly enough I did notice that Florida is considered as one of the highest risk areas for murders in the United States and, if you recall from above, Florida also has a very high concentration of net goths. I wonder if it's dangerous to walk the streets with black lipstick and lace in the Sunny Florida?

Speaking of quizzes, I put my morals to test at the Lie, Cheat & Steal: Dishonesty In America (<http://www.msnbc.com/>) site. Here I was required to answer a series of questions. The answers included a dishonest one as a choice. The instructions had me answer the questions based on the assumption that I would not be caught. Out of a possible 100 points, I scored a 30. I was marked a weasel. Is bringing 14 items to the Ten Items-Or-Less line at the supermarket really that bad?

After learning way too much about myself with these tests, I clicked my way back to the original Alta Vista report of extreme horror sites. I found my very own Fuck That Weak Shit Award (<http://www.wickedmystic.com/award.htm>) page listed. Here I showcase sites I feel push the boundaries of design and content --basically ones that give the finger to the passing of the 1996 Telecommunications Decency Act. One such winner of this award is the Marilyn Manson Page (<http://nexxus.novasys.com/~dsvach/manson.html>). Here I finally learned what happened at the infamous Dallas, Texas show on January 13, 1994 in which the band was accused of "presenting a bloodfest by brutally dismembering and killing a chicken on-stage" and the audience was accused of "having dismembered the live chicken in a bacchanalian orgy of violence." There was a live chicken set loose at the show, but it was not harmed in any way.

Why not get some shopping done online? Need a human skull? Over at Skulldiggery (<http://skulldiggery.com/index.htm>), you can get one for about \$179. They've got skulls of other animals as well. But buying one is no fun. Anyone with a credit card and an empty spot on their coffee table can get one here. Maybe you'd rather dig one up yourself and save a few bucks. Cemetery Listing Association (<http://mininet.systems.smu.edu/cla/>) conveniently indexes cemeteries from all over the country. If you know the year of death and last name of someone who has died, a database search at this site will tell you which cemetery the person is buried in. For the hell of it, I typed in my ex-wife's name, but her dead body didn't pop up anywhere. Oh well. I bookmarked the site and I'll check back periodically.

Speaking of dead ex-wives, if Necrophilia ([http://student.anu.edu.au/Woroni/Woroni47-8/necrophilia\\_text\\_.html](http://student.anu.edu.au/Woroni/Woroni47-8/necrophilia_text_.html)) is your thing, find out what sort of twisted, deranged pervert takes a shovel, enters a graveyard morgue in the dark of night with the intent of commerce with the guests at this web page.

...I learned the fine art of engaging in sexual relations with the deceased. I learned how to find the right partner: "If a grave consists of a mound of fresh dirt and is covered with flowers, chances are that the stiff hasn't been laying here for too long".

Here's a little tidbit you can impress your friends with at your next party: an aqua-equa-necrophiliac is a person who has a fetish for dead horses underwater.

At another **Necrophilia** (<http://www.primenet.com/~awong/necro/necroman.txt>) site, I learned the fine art of engaging in sexual relations with the deceased. I learned how to find the right partner: "If a grave consists of a mound of fresh dirt and is covered with flowers, chances are that the stiff hasn't been laying here for too long". Reading on, I found out preparation is an important step, "If you're in a cemetery try to drag the corpse out of the grave and behind a bush or to another secluded place. Pumping away in the grave may seem more convenient, but it's a severe disadvantage to you if you need to take off in a hurry". And finally, helpful techniques are offered, "Take the arms and gently lock them in an embrace behind your back, or spread the legs to make sex a bit easier".

Cavorting with a dead body might not be something you'd want to try right away. In that case practicing on a fake corpse first is highly recommended. Over at **Corpses For Sale** (<http://distefano.com/>), you can obtain information on how to build a life-size, realistic, decaying corpse in the confines of your own home. Apparently all materials can be bought at local hardware and hobby stores. You can buy a female one that's already put together from them for about \$500 (\$450 for a male). You get to choose hair color, skin color and degree of decay. They do warn, however, that displaying a corpse in public may break some local laws. Necrophilia in most states is still not a crime, but propping dead Ed on the porch is.

As you can see, there is an endless stream of bizarre places to visit on the wicked web. Every time you think you've hit the weirdest site yet, just keep surfing, you're bound to hit another jaw-dropper around the next corner. You might even be one of the deviant creators.

Ω

*Andre Scheluchin edits Wicked Mystic which publishes "explicit, gut-wrenching, brutally twisted, warped, sadistic, deathly, provocative, nasty blatant horror" and stays up late at night drinking Dr. Pepper and Jack Daniels while surfing the Net. He never has heard from Erika.*

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Howard was staring nervously up at the life-size model of a blue whale when he heard the women behind him. "Doesn't look much like *my* idea of a mermaid," said one, in a voice so effortlessly sexy that Howard immediately turned to look at her. She and her friend — girlfriend, Howard decided after a glance — were standing by the manatee exhibit. They were too well dressed to be tourists, and he was unable to guess their ages or place their accents. "Mine neither," replied the other woman, chuckling. She was so different from her partner — dark-skinned, black-haired and nearly six feet tall — that Howard couldn't decide who was the more beautiful. "I suppose sailors on long voyages couldn't afford to be fussy," she continued. "Still, I think a few centuries of evolution could produce something more convincing. Look what it did to the Heike crabs."

The tiny blonde raised a perfect eyebrow. "The what?"

"Heike crabs. Its shell resembles the face of a samurai in a helmet; that's why the Japanese don't eat them. They throw them back if they catch them. Artificial selection."

The blonde nodded. "I always thought of the mermaid as being more like an anglerfish. The woman part is just a lure; the rest is attached to some monstrous fish with a big mouth." They walked past Howard without even a glance; Howard looked around at the exhibits, and decided to follow them. He'd been backpacking around America for three months, and while the Smithsonian was fascinating, he'd seen too many museums and too few beautiful women. Walking across the Mall to the Metro station, he realised that he'd only had sex once since breaking up with Sondra, and that had been a minor disaster. Until now, he hadn't missed it; suddenly, nothing else was as important.

He sat behind them on the train, still enjoying the sound of their voices, watching them until the blonde took a comb and mirror out of her handbag and made some minor adjustment to her hair. He had a brief glimpse of her blue-green eyes before he turned away and feigned interest in the route map. The women alighted at Gallery Place, and strolled up 7th towards Chinatown, crossing the street to avoid a row of adult bookshops. Howard glanced at an ad — **LIVE GIRLS**, it boasted, making him wonder if anyone would be depraved enough to offer *dead girls* — and hesitated for a moment. It suddenly hit him that there was

no point in following the women, who could not possibly have been interested in an overweight backpacking engineering drop-out, even if they were straight. He was short on experience and social graces as well as cash, and would have had difficulty satisfying one strange woman, much less two. A few minutes in a video booth was much more likely to ease his frustration. He looked his last at the women, then at the shop and, after a moment's hesitation, walked in.

The bookshop was empty apart from a bored-looking man at the counter, who handed him eight tokens in exchange for two dollars. Howard walked nervously into a booth that smelt vaguely like fish and pheromones, closed the door behind him, sat down on the bench, fed a counter into the slot, and unzipped his jeans. There was a choice of twenty-four programmes available, and he flicked through five of them hoping for something to catch his interest before he realised what was wrong. Even when the women were attractive, even when the performers seemed to be enjoying themselves, he wasn't involved, he wasn't there, no one was aware of him, it was as though he didn't exist at all. After a few minutes, he was feeling even more frustrated, but no longer aroused. He zipped up his pants and was about to walk out, when he remembered the *Live Girls*

sign. In the peep-show, he might find a woman who would at least acknowledge his existence. He went to the counter for more tokens, then dashed into the *Live Show* booth and quickly shut the door. He fed five tokens into the slot, and the wood-veneer panel on the other side of the window slid up, revealing a large and rather sweaty pair of breasts and a paperback which disappeared before he could read the title. "Hi, there," the woman purred, her eyes widening as she saw him. "I'm Lorelei. What would you like to see?"

Howard swallowed. He tried to answer, but his mouth was too dry. Lorelei stood, turned away from him, and bent over. "This?" she crooned, looking between her legs at his face. "Do you want to see inside me? All the way inside?" She reached back with both hands, and opened herself to his gaze. "I bet you wish that glass wasn't there, don't you?"

Howard grunted, then recovered his voice. "Yes."



"I can remove it if you like," Lorelei said. "Only ten dollars, and you can get as close as you like, see everything there is to see..."

Howard fumbled for his wallet, and reluctantly looked away for long enough to extract two fives. He waved these at the glass, and Lorelei turned to face him again, kneeling before the window, which quickly slid towards the floor. He slid off the bench until his face was level with hers. She smiled, then — to his amazement and delight — kissed him quickly on the left cheek and then on the left eye. He was about to speak when she opened her

mouth and sucked the eye in. For an instant, it seemed to Howard that he could see all the way inside her — and then her teeth clicked together, severing his optic nerve. Before she could pull away, she opened her mouth wider, and sucked his brain out through the empty socket.

The tiny blonde came in half an hour later with a garbage-bag, and gathered up Howard's wallet, clothes, and bones. "Scarcely worth the effort," she murmured, counting his cash. Her feet hurt like Hell, and she was sure the sunlight was drying her out.

# THE UNCLAIMED ZONES: An Interview with Poppy Z. Brite

By Bradley H. Sinor



Poppy Z. Brite has been labeled many things including "perhaps the best-known and most widely read of today's crop of Generation horror/dark fantasy writers." Her popularity and near-cult following result from her deliciously decadent, decidedly sensual, lush style that entrances the reader to follow her stories anywhere — and "anywhere" for Brite can be beyond anything the reader has imagined.

Peter Straub has said of Ms. Brite, "She is the only writer I know who could write a guidebook to Hell that would make me want to go there."

Her first short stories appeared in the legendary *The Horror Show* between 1985 and 1990. Many of her stories are collected in *Swamp Foetus*, and its mass market version *Wormwood*. Other work has appeared in numerous anthologies including *Borderlands 1* and *3*, *Women Of Darkness 2*, *The Earth Strikes Back*, *Dark Destinies 2*, *Splatterpunks 2*, *Millennium*, and *Noirotica*.

*Lost Souls*, her first novel, was published in 1990, and her second, *Drawing Blood* in 1993. She edited a popular anthology of erotic vampire fiction, *Love In Vein* and has now completed its companion volume which is scheduled for an early 1997 release.

Her third and already controversial novel, *Exquisite Corpse*, which deals with two gay, cannibalistic necrophiliacs, has just been published.

A biography of Hole front woman Courtney Love-Cobain is her most recently completed project.

She has accepted an invitation as Guest of Honor at the 1997 World Horror Convention next spring in Niagara Falls, New York.

Q: Let's start with some biographical information. . .

A: I was born in New Orleans on May 25, 1967. I lived here until just after my sixth birthday. At that time my parents divorced and my mother and I moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where I lived until 1988. Then I moved to Athens, Georgia, and lived there until I moved back to New Orleans in May, 1993. All these places had a strong effect on me: some of my earliest memories are of my parents bringing me to the French Quarter exploring the voodoo shops and the strange-scented streets. Chapel Hill was where I did most of my growing up, and while I have nothing good to say about North Carolina schools or politics, I loved driving around the countryside up there, happening upon all the weird little towns, Civil War graveyards, nuclear power plants and whatnot. Athens had more artists, freaks and ne'er-do-wells per square inch than anywhere else I've lived -- I liked that.

I moved back to New Orleans because I have always considered it my home. In May 1995 I bought a house in uptown New Orleans and now live there, a big old Spanish Colonial mansion built in 1919. Living in New Orleans is just something I had to do. I plan to stay.

**I had to learn to love  
the thrill in a form I  
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trained myself well --  
now I can watch any  
sort of atrocity, torture  
or mutilation without  
looking away. I don't  
feel desensitized to it,  
just fascinated.**

Q: How did you first begin writing? When did it become serious?

A: I have been writing since I can remember. I first submitted work for publication (and got my first rejection slip) at twelve. From that point on I was pretty serious about it, but sixteen was the age at which I realized I wasn't fit for anything else, so I would have to make it as a writer.

Q: What about your first sale?

A: It was a short story, "Optional Music for Voice and Piano." I sold it to *The Horror Show* magazine in 1985. I was eighteen, living in Chapel Hill and working in a candy store.

Q: When did you first get interested in horror? What do you like about it? What do you think draws people to it?

A: I've always liked reading horror. I couldn't bring myself to watch graphic horror movies until I was in my teens. As a child they intrigued me, but I was scared to actually watch. I had to learn to love the thrill in a form I could control, a form I could put down for awhile if it got too intense. I guess I trained myself well -- now I can watch any sort of atrocity, torture or mutilation without looking away. I don't feel desensitized to it, just fascinated.

There are a million answers I could give as to why I like horror or why anyone likes it, for that matter. Here's one: In good horror stories, interesting and unpredictable things always happen. I like to read all types of fiction and nonfiction, but a problem I keep running into with "mainstream" fiction -- the kind that appears in literary magazines and 100 Best American Short Stories and such -- is that too often nothing much happens. The characters are often boring people in the first place, the plot consists of them reaching some kind of epiphany and you're supposed to give a damn. So often, mainstream fiction simply isn't a good read.

Q: Were horror movies an influence on you as a writer?

A: Movies have never been a seminal influence on me the way they are for some horror writers. I haven't seen most of the grand old monster movies, though I read the classics many of them derive from. Kids my age grew up with occasionally-fun-but-mindless crap like the *Friday the Thirteenth* and *Halloween* movies.

This was the stuff the normal, popular kids in my high school liked. (Naturally -- it reinforced their credo that the mutant is an object to be feared and loathed.) I mostly stayed away from it.

Movies like *Blue Velvet*, *Liquid Sky*, *The Tin Drum*, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, *Repo Man*, *Prick Up Your Ears* and *Angel Heart* influenced me, but not until much later. I also like *Natural Born Killers*, *Heavenly Creatures* and *The Godfather*. With the possible exception of *Angel Heart*, none of those are straight horror movies. I haven't seen all that many horror movies I liked. George Romero's Dead trilogy is great and John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing*. I love over-the-top Italian splatter directors like Lucio Fulci, and Dario Argento and the Film Threat videos (*Pus Bucket* is the best horror movie I've seen in years.)

Most of my favorite directors -- David Lynch, Ken Russell, Richard Elfman, John Waters, Greg Araki, Robert Altman -- don't make horror movies, though they have all worked with horrific elements.

I also like bitch-goddess films like *Sunset Boulevard*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and the little-known masterpiece *Death Games*, which must have been one of Sondra Locke's first movies.

**Yes, I live to be exploited. As for criminal instincts, I can only hope so.**

**Preferably they will arouse a serial killer along the lines of Albert Fish, who will exterminate a few bratty kids. I hate bratty kids with a cruel passion.**

Q: Has there been any film interest in your own work?

A: I've had a few nibbles here and there. My director of choice would be Greg Araki, who directed *The Living End*, my favorite HIV+ nihilist love story.

Q: Would you be interested in doing the script?

A: I would like the money from screenwriting, but the form doesn't interest me. I don't think my talents run in that direction. And any director with the obsessive vision the material requires would probably want to write his own script.

Q: Speaking of movies, can you tell us about this erotic movie you were in?

A: I was one of three actors in *John Five*, a short erotic film directed by James Herbert, who lives in Athens and had done most of REM's videos. The other actors were John Corry and Noah Ray, two cute nineteen-year olds who were my neighbors at the time. Jim chooses his actors by their general look and attitude -- it wasn't like I auditioned or anything, though I did get paid.

Q: You posed semi-nude for *Mondo 2000* and more recently fully nude for *Rage*. Do you think "those kind" of pictures exploit those in them or arouse criminal instincts in those that see them?

A: Yes, I live to be exploited. As for criminal instincts, I can only hope so. Preferably they will arouse a serial killer along the lines of Albert Fish, who will exterminate a few bratty kids. I hate bratty kids with a cruel passion.

Q: Your standard bios always note you've been an artist's model and a stripper. . .

A: I've also worked in a gourmet candy store, as a caretaker for mice in a cancer research lab, a short order cook and a cake decorator. Those two jobs were like the others -- they paid my rent and financed my real work.

Modeling for university art classes was fun because I met a lot of freaks and occasionally got paid to sit and read a book while people drew me. I don't have much natural modesty, so the nudity wasn't a big deal. Stripping was the last job I had before *Lost Souls* sold to Abyss and I knew I was on the verge of

making my living as a writer, so it wasn't as bleak as it might have been. But it was the most physically and psychically exhausting work I have ever done -- having to look great and be charming on spike heels for eight hours a day.

Q: Do you have plans for more adult movie appearances or nude modeling?

A: I've never been in an "adult movie" as most people think of them! *John Five* is pretty blurry and artsy-fartsy. I would appear in an adult movie, but only if I got to sodomize a corpse. (Aside from a few recent dalliances with exotica, my life is shockingly tame.) As for nude modeling, I enjoy it and I'll probably show it while anyone still wants to see it.

Q: You've said that the straight press has called your fiction amoral. Why do you think that is?

A: That was said mostly of *Lost Souls*. And I'm sure it will be said of *Exquisite Corpse*. A fundamental belief of mine -- but one that was difficult to express in *Lost Souls*, since the book was the bastard child of my teenage angst and my early-twenties depression -- is that people who reject society's codes and morals often have very strong ones of their own. Freak subcultures have their own ethics, their own systems of trust. The townies in *Missing Mile* not only take care of their own, they also watch out for all the lost and seeking souls who wander into town.

But I do think my fiction is amoral, in that I'm not interested in exploring the traditional horror dichotomy of good and evil. To me, this dichotomy has outlived its usefulness in horror. There are writers who have done it and still do it brilliantly, Stephen King being the foremost example. But I have never wished to explore it in my own work, mostly because I don't care very much about "good" or "evil." They seem too absolute, too set in stone, to be really interesting. I prefer to spend my time in the grey areas, the unclaimed zones.

...I don't care very much about "good" or "evil." They seem too absolute, too set in stone, to be really interesting. I prefer to spend my time in the grey areas, the unclaimed zones.

Q: Do you see any single theme running through your work?

A: I can't think about things like genres and themes when I am working. How can I know what the themes of a work are when I haven't finished writing it? So there is no one intended theme that I base all my work on. Looking back on everything I've written, there are some pretty obvious threads: voluntary alienation, the malleability of family, the worship of the mutant, the idea of searching obsessively for something, but not quite knowing what. . .or as the Beatles say, "What do you see when you turn out the light? I can't tell you but I know it's mine."

People are always pointing out to me how badly fathers fare in my work. But I love my dad. I just think fathers in general, and particularly father/son relationships, are the source of a lot of interesting conflict.

Q: Sex, especially gay sex, has been a major factor in both your novels. Why?

A: Almost everyone is fascinated with sex and death. I can't believe it has taken this long for erotic horror to become such a hot commodity. We could have been doing it all along! And some have. . .but now, especially, there seems to be a plethora of good writers exploring the fact that erotic horror can be so much more than a demon prostitute biting some guy's dick off.

I write about gay sex because it's the kind I like.

Q: Let's talk about writing. We understand you don't work from an outline with your novels. What works for you?

A: I don't control the writing of my novels; my characters do. If they ever deign to provide me with an outline, I'll be happy to work with one, but they haven't done so yet. In slightly less psychotic terms, I mean that I don't think of a story, then make up characters to populate it: I wait for characters to make themselves known to me. Once they have done so, they usually let me know what their stories are. But they never tell me all at once. They reveal themselves and their lives bit by bit. So, going into a novel, I usually have no idea what is going to happen at the end. Or I may have some idea of an ending, but no idea how I am going to get there. So the concept of an outline just doesn't work for me, although I keep a lot of notes as I go along.



Q: Did your latest novel, *Exquisite Corpse*, turn out the way you expected it to? Was it "fun" to write?

A: No, it was horrible. It took 2 years, most of which I spent loathing it. Since I begin novels with only the most embryonic of expectations as to how they will "turn out," I am always surprised and frequently dismayed.

Q: We were under the impression that you had some difficulty finding a publisher for *Exquisite Corpse* -- yet here you are coming out from Simon & Schuster, not exactly a minor publisher nor one noted for horror. How did this come about?

A: I guess Bob Asahina at S&S was the first editor to see the book who had the balls to want to publish it and the power to back it up. It was amazing how gutless some of the rejections were -- "We think it is your finest writing ever but we just don't feel we can defend publishing it," that kind of thing from almost every editor who read the manuscript.

Simon & Schuster are publishing it as mainstream fiction, not horror.

Q: How surprised are you with where the finished story ends up as compared to where you thought it would when you started?

A: Very surprised, almost always. As I said before, all I know when I begin is the characters. I always think I know them very well at the outset, but they always surprise me -- and if I get too complacent, start taking them for granted, they're always ready to kick my ass.

For example, at the beginning of *Drawing Blood*, I knew nothing but Trevor and Zach and the story of how Trevor's dad had murdered his family. I didn't know whether the house was haunted or how. I didn't know what was going to be in Birdland until I got there. I had no idea whether any of the characters would still be alive at the end of the book.

Peter Straub once said in an interview that if he knew how his stories were going to turn out, it wouldn't be any fun writing them. I couldn't agree more.

**Speaking of dickless  
publishers ...  
HarperCollins deemed  
four of the stories I  
selected  
"Inappropriate," and  
censored them from  
the anthology. I  
believe their problems  
were with extreme  
sexual, sadistic, and  
scatological content ...  
the three forbidden S's.**

Q: You edited an extremely popular anthology of erotic vampire stories, *Love in Vein*. How did that happen?

A: John Silbersack of HarperCollins contacted my agent through veteran anthologist Martin Greenberg. He wanted to know if I'd be interested in a co-editing deal. I would solicit and select the stories and Marty would handle the business end of it. This was perfect for me, because I loved the idea of conceiving and editing the book, but I had neither the time or experience to deal with a bunch of contracts and checks. Also, I didn't and don't want to write any more vampire fiction, so this seemed a good way to further explore the possibilities of erotic vampirism without writing about it myself.

I encouraged the writers -- some are old favorites, others are new or are published more widely in other fields -- to explore alternate methods of eroticism and vampirism and boy, did they ever!

1997?

Q: And now the follow-up volume, *Love in Vein 2* is due out in January,

A: Speaking of dickless publishers ... HarperCollins deemed four of the stories I selected "inappropriate," and censored them from the anthology. I believe their problems were with extreme sexual, sadistic, and scatological content ... the three forbidden S's. I hated giving in, of course, but I didn't want to screw everyone else involved in the project. The four authors whose stories got cut weren't happy, but they were very gracious about it, and I hope to market the stories as part of another anthology.

Q: Do you see a conservative trend developing in publishing?

A: Yes, but HarperCollins is an especially conservative publisher. There are still publishers who won't shy away from extreme fiction. I just hope they don't get scared off too.

Q: Do you see yourself moving out of the horror genre?

A: I don't feel that horror is my primary market any longer. Dell marketed my first two novels very well as horror novels, but they had no idea how to target, say, a youth readership or a gay readership.

I'm well-known enough in horror that people who like my work will buy a new book even if it's not labeled 'horror.' My intention is not to abandon horror, just to broaden my readership.

Q: You've just finished a biography of Courtney Love. We've heard she's a fan of *Lost Souls*. Are you a fan of hers?

A: Yes. She's one of the few white female singers I can stand..

[Courtney Love Is] one of the few white female singers I can stand.

Q: This is a departure from everything you've done before. Did you find it a challenge?

A: Yes, particularly the aspect of being forced to explore such a strong female character. This is something I haven't managed to do in fiction, so it's a very satisfying stretch.

Q: Just like fans with performers, readers often build up certain ideas about writers from reading their fiction. What type of image do you think you have and do you like it?



A: Well, Dan Simmons told me that Stephen King once said to him, "I don't know if Poppy Z. Brite is a real person or pseudonym, but he, she, or it writes some weird shit!" Stephen King is one of the most constant and enthusiastic readers I know of, and I couldn't ask for a better reader reaction.

Attending conventions and doing book tours, I've met a lot of readers and fans. I can't tell what they think of me — I never can tell what anyone thinks of me. I'm not a good judge of that. They are very nice. They say kind, often perceptive things about my work. They tell me my work has helped them through difficult times, which I love to hear. *After Lost Souls* came out, I think everyone expected me to be a ghostly Gothic girl, all doom and gloom and black eyeliner, but they were several years too late. Now I've been around long enough and have had enough of a public persona that people know what to expect. Everyone has heard SOMETHING about me -- sometimes wildly exaggerated or an outright lie, but people do live to talk. I'll be worried when they stop talking.

Q Inevitably, since you are both women and both have written about vampires and New Orleans, you have been compared to Anne Rice. How do you feel about that?

A: I'm pretty sick of it. I guess there are some superficial parallels, but the fact is that Anne Rice is simply not an influence on me. I haven't read her work. Besides, I understand she has revolutionized an entire subgenre of horror fiction, the vampire tale. I wrote one novel about vampires and that's all I ever intend to write about them.

I'm not much interested in comparing writers anyway. It seems to me like arguing about colors. But if you must compare me, compare me to someone who has had an effect on my work: Peter Straub, Dennis Cooper, William S. Burroughs, Kathe Koja, Thomas Ligotti... any number of writers. I just prefer it to be one I've actually read.

Q: Do you have stories in you that you don't feel ready to write yet?

A: Well, sure. But I don't know what they are yet. Once I meet a character or come up with an idea, I pretty much have to go ahead and write the story, else I'll lose momentum. There are entire sets of characters that I will probably never write about, just because I didn't do it when they first presented themselves to me. Obviously I'll write things when I'm fifty that I'm not yet ready to do — but how can I know, at 29, what those things will be?

**Everyone has heard SOMETHING about me — sometimes wildly exaggerated or an outright lie, but people do live to talk. I'll be worried when they stop talking,**

Q: These characters of yours. . .how would you feel about having some of them as neighbors?

A: I am not only delighted at the prospect of socializing and/or living with my characters, I do it frequently. Back in Athens, I lived in a little enclave of houses and apartments down by the train tracks that became known as The Compound. (It was also known as Ferretland, but that never really caught on.) There was always some madness going on. People knocking on your door at all hours to see if you wanted to do acid, screaming fights and fucks, parties, guerrilla art, visiting rock stars, fires, ghosts, all manner of chemical lunacy, drunken games of "Truth or Dare." John Corry, my underage co-star from *John Five*, once spent a week staggering around in his bathrobe clutching a hospital urinal full of whiskey. Eventually the Compound's tendrils reached for several blocks and it sort of collapsed under its own weight, but instead of dying, it managed to mutate and keep evolving to this day. Anyway, it was like nothing so much as living in the thick of some particularly fucked up bunch of my own characters and it was great fun.

Q: Where do you want to be in another ten years?

A: I expect I'll maintain a home in New Orleans until I die, but I intend to travel a lot. Ten years from now I want to have gone to Asia at least twice and a bunch of other places.

As a writer, I cannot know where I will be. I follow my obsessions and write about them. I have no idea what my obsession will be in ten years. I certainly don't expect writing to get any easier.

Q: Is there anything else you want to throw at us?

A: Now you're trying to provoke me to violence.

Ω

## AN EXCERPT FROM: *Exquisite Corpse*

**A Novel by Poppy Z. Brite**

Sometimes a man grows tired of carrying everything the world heaps upon his head. The shoulders sag, the spine bows cruelly, the muscles tremble with weariness. Hope of relief begins to die. And the man must decide whether to cast off his load or endure it until his neck snaps like a brittle twig in autumn.

Such was my situation late in my thirty-third year. Although I deserved everything the world had heaped on -- and torments after death far worse than any the world could threaten, the torture of my skeleton, the rape and dismemberment of my immortal soul -- though I deserved all that and more, I found that I could no longer bear the weight.

I realized I didn't have to bear it, you see. I came to understand that I had a choice. It must have been difficult for Christ himself to withstand the agonies of the cross -- the filth, the thirst, the terrible spikes raping the jellied flesh of his hands -- knowing he had a choice. And I am not Christ, not even by half.

My name is Andrew Compton. Between 1977 and 1988 I killed twenty-three boys and young men in London. I was seventeen years old when I began, twenty-eight when they caught me. All the time I was in prison, I knew that if they ever let me out I would continue killing boys. But I also knew they would never let me out.

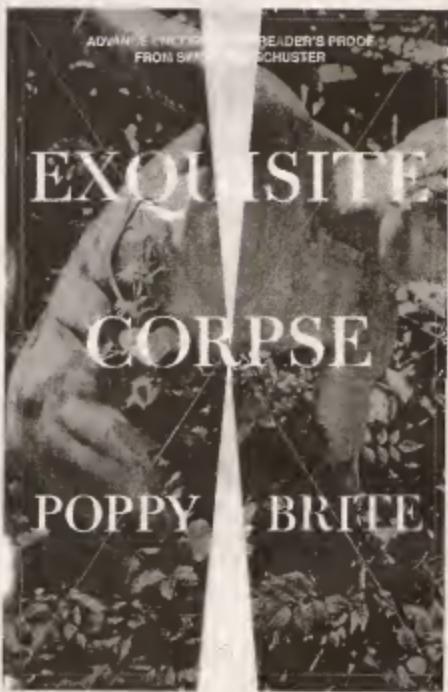
My boys and young men were transients in the city: friendless, hungry, drunk and strung out on the excellent Pakistani heroin that has coursed through the veins of London since the swinging sixties. I gave them good food, strong tea, a warm place in my bed, what few pleasures my body could provide. In return, all I asked was their lives. Sometimes they appeared to give those as readily as anything else.

I remember a sloe-eyed skinhead who went home with me because he said I was a nice white bloke, not a bleeding queer like most of these others that chatted him up in the pubs of Soho. (What he was doing in the pubs of Soho, I cannot tell you.) He did not seem inclined to revise his opinion even as I sucked his cock and slid two greasedfingers into his anus. I noticed later that he had a dotted line tattooed in scarlet round his throat, along with the words CUT HERE. I had only to follow directions. ("You look like a bleeding queer," I'd told his headless corpse, but young Mr. White England had nothing to say for himself anymore.)

I killed most of the twenty-three by cutting. By severing their major arteries with a knife or a razor after they were insensible from drink. I killed them this way not out of cowardice or from a wish to avoid struggle; though I am not a large man, I could have overcome any of my half-starved, drug-addled waifs in a fair fight. I killed them by cutting because I appreciated the beautiful objects that their bodies were, the bright ribbons of blood coursing over the velvet of their skin, the feel of their muscles parting like soft butter. I drowned two in the bath, and choked one with the laces of his own Doctor Marten boots as he lay in a drunken stupor. But mostly I killed them by cutting.

This is not to say that I took them to pieces for pleasure. I found no joy in gross mutilation or dismemberment, not then; it was the subtle whisper and slice of the razor that appealed to me. I liked my boys as they were, big dead dolls with an extra weeping crimson mouth or two. I would keep them with me for as much as a week, until the smell in my flat grew obvious. I did not find the odour of death unpleasant. It was rather like cut flowers left too long in stagnant water, a heavy sickish sweetness that coated the nostrils and curled into the back of the throat with every breath.

But the neighbours complained, and I would have to invent some excuse or other, something about my waste disposal backing up or my toilet having overflowed. (Humiliating, and ultimately futile, for it was a neighbour who called the police in the end.) I would leave a boy in my armchair when I went to work, and he would be waiting patiently for me when I came home. I would take him



into my bed and cradle his creamy smoothness all night. For a day or two days or a week I wouldn't feel alone. Then it would be time to let another one go.

I would use a saw to cut him in half at the waist, to separate the arms from the torso, to bisect the legs at the knee. I would wrestle the segments into bulging bags of wet garbage, where their odd angles and powerful stench might be disguised, and leave them out for collection. I would drink whiskey until the flat spun. I would vomit in the basin and sob myself to sleep, having lost at love again. I did not come to appreciate the aesthetics of dismemberment until much later.

But for now I sat in a dank cell in Her Majesty's Prison Painswick, in Lower Slaughter near the industrial wasteland of Birmingham. These lurid appellations might seem designed to terrify and titillate the soul, and so they do. Look on any map of England and you'll find them, along with places called Grimsby, Kettle Crag, Fitful Head, Mousehole, Devil's Elbow, and Stool End Farm. England is a country that spares no resonance or descriptive colour in its place-names, forbidding though they may be.

I'd looked around my cell without much interest when they brought me in five years ago. I knew I was classed as a Category A prisoner. (D was the least dangerous sort; C and B types you mightn't want to turn your back on; A was, of course, the ravening killer.) The papers had dubbed me "The Eternal Host" and invested my unremarkable black-and-white visage with a dread that bordered on the talismanic. The contents of my flat had been lovingly inventoried a hundred times over. My trial was a legal circus of the vilest sort. The possibility of my escape was deemed highly dangerous to the public. I would remain Category A until the day I died with my eyes fixed on some bleak eternity beyond these four mouldering stone walls.

I could receive no visitors without approval from the prison governor and close supervision. I didn't care; everyone I had ever loved was dead. I could be denied education and recreation, but at that time there was nothing more in life I wanted to learn, no fun I wanted to have. I must endure a light burning constantly in my cell, all night, all day, until the outline of it was seared into my corneas. All the better, I thought then, to stare at these hands steeped in blood.

Aside from my blazing bulb and my guilty hands, I had an iron bed bolted to the wall and covered with a thin lumpy mattress, a rickety table and chair, and a pot to piss in. I often reminded myself that at least I had a pot to piss in, but this was cold comfort indeed -- quite literally so on winter mornings in Painswick. I had all these things inside a stone box measuring three and a half by four metres.

I wondered how many of Her Majesty's prisoners realized the extra half-metre along one wall was a subtle form of torture. (As Oscar Wilde was being hounded in chains round the prison yard, he remarked that if this was how Her Majesty treated prisoners, she had no business having any.) When I looked at this wall for a long time, which was the only way I could look at it, the wrong geometry began to hurt my eyes. For more than a year the imperfect square tormented me. I visualized all four walls grinding in, cutting off that dreadful extra half-metre, beginning to crumble around me. Then gradually I got used to it, and that chilled me as much as the torment had done. I've never liked getting used to things, especially when I am given no choice in the matter.

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collection.

Once they realized I wasn't going to make trouble, I was given all the notebooks and pencils I wanted. I was seldom allowed out of my cell except for solitary exercise and showers; sudden joyless meals were brought to me by silent guards with faces like the judgement at the end of time. I could do no harm with my pencils save driving one into my own eye, and I wore them down too dull for that.

I filled twenty notebooks my first year, thirty-one my second, nineteen my third. At this time I was as close to true remorse as I ever came. It was as if I had been in a dream that lasted eleven years, and had woken from it into a world I barely recognized. How had I ever done twenty-three killings? What had made me want to? I attempted to plumb the depths of my soul with words. I dissected my childhood and family (stultifying but hardly traumatic), my sexual history (abortive), my career in various branches of the civil service (utterly without distinction, except for the number of times I was fired for insubordination to my superiors).

This done, and little learned, I began to write about the things that interested me now. I found myself with a great many descriptions of murders and sex acts performed upon dead boys. Small details began to return to me, such as the way a fingerprint would stay in the flesh of a corpse's thigh as if pressed into wax, or a cold thread of semen would sometimes leak out of a flaccid penis as I rolled it about on my tongue.

The only constant thread running through my prison notebooks was a pervasive loneliness with no discernible beginning and no conceivable end. But a corpse could never walk away.

I came to understand that these memories were my salvation. I no longer wanted to know why I had done such things if it meant I wouldn't want to do them anymore. I put my notebooks aside forever. I was different, and that was all. I had always known I was different; I could not trudge through life contentedly chewing whatever cud I found in my mouth, as those around me seemed to do. My boys were only another thing that set me apart from the rest.

Someone had loved my boys once upon a time, someone who did not have to steal their lives to show that love. Each had been someone's baby once. But so had I, and what good did it ever do me? By all accounts, I emerged from the womb quite blue, with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, and my state of life or death was disputed for several minutes before I sucked in a great gulp of air and began to breathe on my own. The boys I killed may have been strapping infants, but at the time of their deaths they were intravenous drug users who shared needles as if borrowing one another's pocket handkerchiefs, who often traded blowjobs for cash or a fix. Of those I took to bed with me while they were still alive, not one asked me to use a condom, and not one expressed concern when I swallowed his sperm. I suspected later that I may have actually saved lives by killing some of them.

I was never one to moralize, and how could I argue ethics now? There is no excuse for wanton, random murder. But I came to understand that I didn't need an excuse. I only needed a reason, and the terrible joy of the act was reason enough. I wanted to return to my art, to fulfill my obvious destiny. I wanted the rest of my life to do as I pleased, and I had no doubt what that would be. My hands itched for the blade, for the warmth of fresh blood, for the marble smoothness of flesh three days dead.

I decided to exercise my freedom of choice.  $\Omega$

*My hands Itched for  
the blade, for the  
warmth of fresh blood,  
for the marble  
smoothness of flesh  
three days dead.*

Even with all the PC celebrities that reside in Malibu, the citizens of this bastion of prosperity couldn't hide their disdain of us. To them we were gypsies, tramps and skeevs. Shit like raised eyebrows were the norm. Worse than the outright starers were the sorts who tried sneaking peeks at us. You know, looking at us, but not making eye contact for fear they might catch a disease?

Rikki was a blond-haired Japanese transvestite whose main goal in life was to kill the guitarist in Smashing Pumpkins so he could corner the market on eccentric Asians. He wasn't bad looking for a guy who liked to dress like a girl. Sometimes, but very rarely, he just looked like a rocker who belonged posing up on Sunset Strip. He was also the sort of alcoholic who would blow the foam off a bed pan, if ya know what I mean. But no matter how much cheap hooze he drank, drugs he snorted, or days he went without bathing, his complexion was always flawless. Waif — tattered, yellow and, more often than not, a hot bitch that had heteros guessing: Is he a dude? And the corollary: If he is a dude and I find him attractive, does that make me a fag?

Rikki had impeccable taste in women's clothing, mixing and matching in a manner that most women could only dream of. Since the bulk of his wardrobe came from genuine thrift stores, not boutiques charging extravagant prices for thrift store chic, Rikki was constantly unveiling new duds. Purple platform shoes were his sneakers that day. When need be, he could run in shoes most couldn't dance in. Torn fishnet stockings covered his thin legs and were held in place by a garter belt that he refused to hide under his black leather mini-skirt. His stomach was muscular not from exercise, but rather from not eating. The reason I knew the details about Rikki's stomach was because he fancied those cotton tube tops that went out of fashion back in the 'seventies only to be resurrected in the 'nineties. The top he sported was blue with a white star in the center. Over this he wore a tattered red leather coat with the elbows of each sleeve torn out.

Rikki had this perpetual pout that he wore really well. Maybe it was his thin face combined with Mick Jagger lips. Or maybe he was supposed to be pouting all the time. Whatever it was, he didn't have no "Have A Nice Day" round face like many big-headed Asians. Instead, Rikki's facial features, the high cheek bones and perfect chin, were finely chiseled. His brown eyes were tiny almonds that he accentuated with just the right amount of eyeliner. He reminded me of a Siamese cat, and, depending on my mood, I would rub behind his ear or yank on his tail.

"The light's green."

I turned and snapped, "Thanks for nuthin'."

"Jeez ..."

"Jeez what?"



"Jesus Christ."

"Good hitter, but no hands. What'da ya say before that?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Okay, what'd I say?"

"That the light was green..."

I can't recall how long we'd been calling this particular area home, probahly a few weeks, maybe a month, maybe two. It's funny how time flies when yer whacked out of yer skull. That's why we left North Hollywood in the first place; everybody there's so fuckin' wired to the gills. It got too freakin' freaky even for us, and we usually revel in insanity, especially our own. Maybe when we cut outta Dodge we should've left our vices behind as well.

Then again, vice is virtue depending on one's point of view.

"Where the fuck we goin?" Rikki asked from the back seat of the '66 Impala. He was as jittery as a nun in a cucumber patch.

This car was on its last leg as far as I was concerned. When you're in our line of work you go through cars the way whores go through condoms. I liked fast. I estimated our current speed to be somewhere around 45 MPH, but since the speedometer was broken, I couldn't really tell. I'm sure a cop with a radar gun could tell. Getting pulled over could really ruin our day for the next few years. But when you're driving under the influence of methamphetamine, your peripheral vision becomes secondary sight; kind of like another set of eyes in addition to the main one. Regular vision is like the front windshield. It's this second vision that gives me an advantage over the local law enforcement. I know when they're hiding, eager to turn on their sirens and issue speeding tickets.

I'd been a few days since I'd slept, but I wasn't tired.

"Supplies," I replied.

"Supplies?"

"Yeah, supplies."

I knew my answer probably had Rikki's spun little mind spinning since we still had like over an ounce of profit. There was a momentary pause where nothing but the sound of engine and road filled our humming senses.

"What kinda supplies?" Rikki asked taking the last sip of his 40 ounce Budweiser.

"Supplies!" added Sheila, speaking for the first time in like five minutes which for her was a new world record.

Sheila was an Olympic gold medalist when it came to downhill tweaking. She could spend days snorting and doing recreational activities like puzzles, painting, writing letters she'd never send, cleaning, resetting the pre-set dials on the stereo, sewing, beading, talking on the phone, sculpting, organizing, doing what little was left of her fingernails, doodling, re-arranging the furniture, applying makeup, smoking Marlboro Light 100s, reading, and coloring. While to the average citizen all of these activities might seem like an extensive course in procrastination, to Sheila they were the essence of life.

Fiddling with her AirTouch pager, Sheila looked up from under her black shades, wondering if I was going to say something. When I didn't, she returned her attention to the pager as if willing someone to call. Somewhere in her overcrowded black leather handbag there was a cellular phone.

Sheila looked like she could be from the midwest or somewhere with her obvious anglo-features. I'm sure at some point in her life there was a certain innocence to her. Mousy blonde hair that, when recently washed, shined brilliantly; high cheekbones, thin lips, and a slender build should have made her attractive, but something had

happened to her. Whether it was the life she'd lead or the drugs she'd taken is debatable, but whatever it was, Sheila looked hitter.

Too bitter to be cute anymore.

Like lotsa tweakers, she looked like she was suffering from an eating disorder. Even though she could definitely use a cheeseburger or two, the chickie was never hungry. When she did chow it was strictly junkfood which, in turn, did wonders for her complexion. Unlike

Rikki, Sheila's skin did suffer the consequences of non-stop abuse. Even when she was completely broken out with pinkish red mortars exploding all over her face, she wasn't totally unattractive, though. Unfortunately, she wasn't blonde enough to believe that jism would care bad skin.

Sheila had really round, doll-like eyes and depending on how high she was, they would hug out. Fortunately, she never got to that ooey gooey eyeball state that some cracksters did where they looked like whacked out goldfish who might drop an orh if they bent over too quickly. On the other hand, no matter how much cover up she applied she couldn't hide the dark circles underneath her translucent green pupils. Although a bonafide speed freak, Sheila did sleep. A lot actually. She had it down to where she was getting more shut-eye than the average schmoe. Let's say the average person gets eight hours of sleep a night. Over the course of a seven day week, that equals fifty-six hours of rest and relaxation. Sheila would party for four days straight then crash out for three which gave her seventy-two hours of sleep. Of course this was not an exact science and we often went eight or nine days sans sleep.

When she used to work a job, Sheila was an exotic dancer, although there was nothing remotely exotic about her. I guess that's why, instead of booking herself at Hollywood hot spots like *Crazy Girls* or *StarStrip*, Sheila worked the outer fringe of total nude joints out by the airport. I remember going to see her dance a few times and the overall atmosphere in dives like these was indifference. Bored and usually bruised strippers were trying to hustle married businessmen and Japanese tourists into bigger tips by flashing glances of the pink. Sheila used to rake in the dough because even though she wasn't model material, she was finer than the majority of the damaged goods who worked in these establishments. Her pale flesh was accented by some freckles as well as several tattoos. Like many strippers, she'd gotten tattooed at an early age. By twenty-two she had five tats. Her first tattoo was a dainty band wrapped around her right ankle. On her left breast was a small purple rose. On each shoulder blade were thick tribal designs, but the piece that separated her from other tattooed dancers was the one found on her pelvis to the right of her small pubic region. About six inches in diameter in solid black ink was an inverted pentagram. The big five pointed, upside down star certainly had blown the minds



of more than a few tipping customers, but that didn't keep them from hitting on Sheila.

As we got nearer to our destination, plans for the day kept dancing through my mind. The shopping center was close to the ocean. Everything in Malibu is close to the ocean. I hated the ocean. Why someone would want to swim in polluted salt water was beyond me. People piss in the ocean and whales fuck in it. What boggled my mind even more was surfing. What's the point of going to the beach, wading out in the cold water, only to ride a piece of fiberglass back into the beach? It's kind of like starting at the finish line then going backwards.

We got out of the car and there was a dog not too far away. It was on a long leash, the retractable kind that could give up to like thirty feet in slack. I guess the dog felt like it had enough room away from its owner because it was licking itself. And this wasn't just your regular dog licking its balls, this dog was on a mission.

"I wish I could do that."

"Maybe you should try petting him first," Sheila snapped as we entered the store.

Regardless of how much supplies we seemed to buy, we always were running back to the store for more. A small bell sounded, taking the overweight female clerk's attention away from the glossy magazine she was reading as she sat enthroned behind the front counter. She greeted us with indifference, not because she couldn't wait to get back to this month's issue of *Mademoiselle*, but because we didn't necessarily strike her as the type of people who should frequent her store.

"Can I help you?"

"Me, or all of us?"

"You, or all of you."

"Where's the make-up?"

"Furtherst aisle on the left," she replied pointing with a tiny faux-diamond in her fingernail.

"Thanks."

The clerk went to say something else, but we had already turned away from her. Working like a SWAT team, Sheila took the far end of the aisle grabbing the base, grease paint, and sponges while Rikki scored three mirrors, lipstick, and some make-up pencils. I supervised, taking a mental inventory of each item, how much it would cost, and would it be enough. After all, professionalism is the difference between success and failure.

We were in and out of the store in less than five minutes.

Since we had an appointment to keep, I managed to get us from Malibu to Agoura Hills in less than fifteen minutes. Once we were on the Ventura 101 freeway, the rest was easy, foot heavy on gas pedal, left lane all the

way. The directions to our destination were easy to follow even for frazzled speed freaks. I parked the car a short distance away from where we were supposed to rendezvous. Sheila handed out the necessities.

Unlike my two partners, I didn't need to pull my hair back into a ponytail. Sheila was always the most creative when it came to doing make-up. She never went too thick or too thin so her face always looked the best. She laid down a solid white foundation with hints of blue blush on her cheeks and chin. Then she circled in around her eyes with the heavy black grease paint making her look like a corpse. Her lips were done in blue. After putting on the final touches to her flawless make-up, Sheila removed her top. Now she was a corpse in a black miracle bra.

"Bitch..."

"Jealous..."

"Show off..."

Rikki, as always, paid homage

to one of his musical heroes by doing his make-up exactly like KISS guitarist Ace Frehley. He laid a thick white foundation all over his face then did his lips in black. Around each eye, attached by a line across the bridge of his nose, were silver triangular bursts. Each eye had seven points with the pupi in the center of these odd-shaped stars. The visual effect had an extra-terrestrial feel to it which was no surprise since Frehley's on-stage persona was an alien from the planet Grendell. Rikki's current persona was Ace Frehley-in-Drag.

I was not nearly as creative as either of my two cohorts but, for some reason, my makeup was always the most disturbing. Shock value did count for something. I, too, did my face in white grease then added the appropriate amounts of black to my eyes and lips. When all was said and done, the final image that I brought to mind was of Death since it now looked like I had a skull for a face.

"What time is it?"

"Show time."

Like an industrial band doing a few lines to get up for their nightly performance, we'd found that we worked better while running on high octane. Pulling out a bindle made of newspaper from one of my vest pockets, I unfolded the packet so the power was accessible. Sheila handed me a straw.

The burning sensation of crystal meth passing through nostrils was second nature to us. I'd seen outlaw bikers cringe at the high quality crank we used but the rush brought on was beyond super-sonic and well worth the momentary discomfort of feeling like a flame thrower had blasted down one's nose.



"Ready?"

"Always fuckin' ready."

I took one last look at the empty bindle in my hand. White residue covered the black print but I'd read these words before, studying them, making sure this was where we should hit. My watery eyes scanned over the newspaper print one final time.

**CUTTRELL, Albert M., 68.** Retired aribusiness banking executive and longtime resident of Agoura Hills, California passed away on June 7, 1996 after a long illness. He is survived by daughters Pauline and Martha, brother Hubert, and four grandchildren: Christopher, Albert, Michael, and

Whatever the rest of the obituary said was irrelevant. I'd read and re-read it before deciding to pick out this funeral home. It had been several weeks since our last appearance. I tried to space them out as much as possible so as not to attract too much attention to our deeds. But like anyone, when the cash flow gets low, it's time to return to work. Like our past heists, I'd planned this gig out as well as possible, knowing the entrance and then, of course, the exit route to the freeway. Barring any complications, which there shouldn't be any since I'd carefully planned this job out, that night we'd be back among the ranks of the casually unemployed speed freaks.

We stepped out of the Impala.

Even though we were walking at a pretty decent pace, so not to be seen by any potential whistle blowers,

every step felt like it was in slow-motion. Or maybe when you about to do something like what we had planned, you took in a little more of your surrounding environment right before the shit started to fly.

Or maybe it was the crank we'd just sniffed...

Parked outside of the small building where the funeral service for Mr. Cuttrell was currently being held were plenty of cars. Each car looked recently washed, but this came as no surprise. There was some sort of unwritten code of funeral etiquette that said cars must be washed and everyone wore their Sunday best. Preparing to enter the building, I mentally hoped that my calculated guess that there would be a lot of expensive Sunday best in the small room would be correct.

The double doors were unlocked. They always were. After all, people were dying to get in.

"TA-DAH!!!"

A collective gasp filled the quiet room. Maybe it was our appearance, or maybe it was the shiny guns in our hands. Whatever it was, we certainly had these teary-eyed, well-dressed mourners' attention. Sheila and I quickly walked down the main aisle toward the front of the room. Rikki covered the rear.

"Nobody move!" Rikki barked, loudly cocking his sawed-off Mossberg, letting everybody know if they moved they were meat.

There was a well dressed man in a suit, who probably had been doing some sort of a farewell speech, at a podium. Next to him was a priest dressed in a long white gown. Also on this little stage at the front of the room was the lead-lined, mahogany casket. A fine casket like this indicated wealth and that the mourners, around thirty people in total, cared about their recently deceased.

"Everybody listen and listen good. As you've probably noticed besides packing a Glock 10, Deadbitch is holding an empty sack that, with your help, won't be empty very long. Deadbitch is gonna come up to each and every one of you and then and only then are you allowed to move. Remove your jewelry and your wallets and drop them gently in the bag. Remember Ace at the back of the room is watching in case you get any wise ideas..."

There was some minor commotion in the room. This usually happened when the mourners realized that they were being robbed.

"Calm down people, calm down!" I ordered, waving my piece from left to right. Funny how if you're holding a gun people who are on the verge of hysteria will find a way to chill the fuck out.

"Excuse me," declared an amplified voice. It was the speaker at the podium.

"Nah, no excuses motherfucker," snapped Sheila taking aim at the speaker. "Either you people co-operate or they'll be cramming you in with the stiff."

"Excuse me," the speaker repeated, showing signs of nervousness but determined to speak his piece. He looked about 60 years old, medium build, thin white hair with a white mustache. There was a gold Rolex around his

left wrist. "This is a funeral. Our dear friend, my brother, is dead and you have the audacity to interrupt his service?"

Sheila nodded, smirking. She and I were standing side by side at the front of the room and I could sense that if Speaker kept it up she was going to waste him.

"How dare you?" he asked.

"Pretty fuckin' easily," I explained. "We got the guns."

"Yes, but you're violating a holy service. A funeral held in the name of Christ."

"Holy is your interpretation of it. We just see it as another gig..."

"But, you see," his voice seemed a little stronger the more he talked. "I've read about you funeral robbers and how you bastards operate. You might be able to fool some of the people some of the time, but you ain't pulling nothing on Hubert Cuttrell. No, siree!"

"You wanna join yer brother in the box?" I asked, heart racing in my chest. Of the six jobs we'd done in Southern California, nobody had ever acted up like this. To a certain extent, but not enough to make me reconsider, I could understand this man's pain. But we were losing valuable time chatting. This robbery should almost be over and instead it was not even started.

I took aim at Hubert.

"Before you do anything you'll regret, can I ask you a question?" Hubert was still jawing.

Exhaling loudly, I waited to see what he had to say.

"You're the ringleader, right? The brains?"

"Up."

"And you probably pick your targets according to what you read in the obituary section of the newspaper, correct?"

Indeed, he was correct. It would be a shame if I had to kill Hubert. He was pretty sharp.

"Well, I helped write the obituary and purposely left out one item about my brother that upset some of the people in this room, but I did it as a security precaution, just in case anything horrible like some fucking funeral clowns decided to hit Albert's service."

We stared at each other, waiting for one of us to speak. Finally, I did.

"And what was this vital piece of information?"

"That my brother was the Vice-Chairman of the Southern California National Rifle Association."

At that exact moment just about everybody in the room pulled out a gun.

Sheila screamed in anger, but I pulled her close to me before she could fire at Hubert. It was a no win situation, a Mexican standoff. Young men, young women, old men, old women -- all had pistols of every different make pointed at us. Not that I'd ever had this many pointed at me at once, but I recognized .22s, .38s, .357s, and .45s. In the back of the room, Rikki had already been removed of his shotgun.

"Ain't this some shit?" I uttered.

"The only shit in this room is you three painted assholes..."

"Yeah, but this asshole has a gun fixed on you so even if one of yer well-to-do associates decides to snuff me I'm taking you with me."

"Possibly."

"Definitely, Hubert."

Then a thought crossed my mind and I did the only thing I figured that, under the circumstances, might save my ass. I pushed Sheila away from me into the center of the room. This sudden, unexpected motion set off a chain reaction of fingers squeezing triggers. It was an instinctive move by the armed mourners that occurred without second thought. They saw a quick movement, feared the worst, and decided to exercise their right to bear arms.

If twenty out of the thirty mourners were packing heat, twenty took target practice at Sheila, who was indeed one dead bitch. The rest annihilated Rikki, who was reduced to Swiss cheese in a pair of bloody platform shoes. I ducked out of the way and kissed the floor. Muzzle flashes were everywhere as were flying bullets and pieces of Sheila. Just as I figured, the mourners shooting towards the front of the room also took out the priest and Hubert before anyone realized what had happened.

When the four seconds of all-out shooting stopped, I jumped up and opened fire. My Beretta 92F weighs two and a half pounds but the reason I favor this 9mm is its muzzle velocity rivals that of a .357 magnum. Unlike your average six shot magnum, this fully automatic pistol has a 15 round clip. I had a spare clip in my vest.

My gunfire caught them by surprise and I had enough fire-power to take out a shitload of stunned mourners while making my way out of the smoke- and blood-filled room, running past the blasted podium and bullet-riddled casket before anyone could return fire.

The back door was unlocked.

All kinds of mental escape routes filled my head, but something told me that running all the way to the getaway car was a bad idea. It would only be a few moments before a bunch of heavily armed NRA members were hot on my heels, trying to shoot me in the back. No, I needed a car ASAP and there were plenty, all of them recently washed, to choose from. Problem was that none of them had keys and I wouldn't have the time to hotwire one.

Another plan then came to mind. I saw my freedom appear in the form of the hearse chauffeur. When he saw a pistol packing madmen with a skull for a face running towards him, he froze.

"Gimme the fucking keys!"

The chauffeur didn't hesitate.

Then, in manner that can only be described as pedal to the fucking metal, Death drove a hearse to freedom.

# A Most Dangerous Game



Steve Berman

## Tales from the Crypt: "For Boils and Ghouls"

You say you're tired of bland roleplaying? The same old horror campaign is looking pretty... barebones? Perhaps West End Games has just the answer to scare away those blahs. After all, how many people could resist matching wits against that most famous of ghouls, the Cryptkeeper.

Yes, there is now a roleplaying game based on the fiendishly fun *Tales from the Crypt*. The appeal of that TV show is in its mix of dark humor and horror. Morality is everything; innocents who suffer get their revenge; justice is always served – and it nastier when it comes from beyond the grave. This may seem a strange setting for a game campaign, but Greg Farshtey and Teeuwynn Woodruff have managed to offer something new and fresh to the horror gaming genre and it deserves a look.

The concept is simple: somehow the player/characters wind up in the clutches of the Cryptmaster, who drops them from adventure to adventure, sometimes physically, other times by ripping out their souls and depositing them into shells or borrowed bodies. His rationale for all this is unclear (even the rulebook cannot offer more than a few guesses,) but it all seems to revolve around the Cryptkeeper's entertainment. Imagine those old Roman emperors staring down at gladiators. There's a quick grin and a thumb pointing down. Only this time add some bad puns when the blood starts to fly.

Motivation for the characters? Survival is number one. The hope of eventually freeing themselves from the ghoul's strings is a distant second. But for the players, the coolest element to this game is that they all possess a dark side, a stain or sin on their souls.

Sure, other games have tried to add this element, by either insisting that the characters are evil or have them be monsters. That's actually more difficult to roleplay than the dark distinctive features this game wants you to have; few people can imagine themselves as something truly inhuman however hard they may try. We all have some bad traits, however, some worse than others. It is far easier to simply embellish on these negative qualities as the basis for your character. The fact that none of the characters in the campaign are really wholesome makes it more believable, as well as fun.

*Tales from the Crypt* can be run as a one-shot adventure or your usual series sewn together to form a campaign. The latter is the most challenging part for the gamemaster –herein called a Cryptkeeper (makes sense.) He has to keep the interest going in a system that struggles to remain chaotic. A jaunt to the circus one week, the seamy side of Prohibition Era New Orleans the next. How about a cozy Victorian murder mystery after that? Head spinning yet? With this game, it may well rotate.

Certainly you can base every adventure in a specific time or place, but that would not be true to all those chilling and corny episodes we all love to watch -- or as much fun. In the end, it seems best to keep a medium beat and shoot for a short-lived campaign. That way the players will still regularly be fed horror, yet not go insane from too many chaotic settings.

Still, the gamemaster may well wind up having more fun than the players, as character gore and gore is expected to be a major part of the game. Strangely, this is one of the few games I've ever seen that doesn't end with a character's death. Even after the fifth mishap with a chainsaw, that unlucky guy can find himself once more in the game. This is good because an accidental demise will not have the sting it usually does. But the game can quickly fall into pure camp or worse if there is little fear of not returning. The rulebook does offer some suggestions on dealing with this, but from experience I suggest the Cryptkeeper gauge player reactions before letting anyone come back intact in the next episode.

The key to success for any game, no matter what its genre, is support material. Fortunately, the folks at West End Games plan on backing up *Tales From the Crypt* with more supplements; the first, "Cryptic Campaigns," is already out. Next is an adventure collection, due in October and also in the works is a non-collectable card game. Guess that would leave some player holding a dead man's hand!

All in all, *Tales from the Crypt* has a lot of potential and should be grabbed on those dark nights when not only a scare but a laugh is wanted. The worldbook reads well and is filled with the sort of bad puns we expect to hear from the Cryptkeeper. It contains a suggested setting for a campaign with plenty of disturbing adventure hooks, some sample arcane items, and a introductory adventure. Still, since this game was spawned by a media sensation, if at all possible, gamemasters should prepare in advance by either watching the television episodes or reading similar 'veined' comic books.

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*Steve Berman is a freelance writer specializing in stories on entertainment, gambling, gaming and the roleplaying industries. His gaming related articles have appeared in d8, White Wolf Magazine and TSR's Dragon among others. He can be emailed at lordicarus@aol.com*

## Transformation

worm meat  
not fit for vultures

what's left of your flesh mottles  
the colors of the putrid rainbow

tissues loosen  
flensed by the jaws of bacteria

flesh curdles layer by layer  
peeling away your last smile

rot reveals a single white beauty  
bone canvas

-- Carol D. Page

# WAYNE'S WORLD

David Niall Wilson

I stood alone among the crowds that had gathered outside the prison, watching in ways they could not, and waiting. I was celebrating the death of John Wayne Gacy, but not in the manner that the rest of them were, or not in the manner that I assumed they were celebrating. I assumed that they were happy because they felt, foolishly, a bit safer. I assumed, as well, that it was a moment of control for them, a moment in which the evil of the world could be labeled, restrained, and would in due time be erased -- wiped out forever.

This latter idea amused me. The "moment of control" theory is one of the prevalent ideas on the motivation of sociopathic killers. It makes sense. It also makes a hell of a mirror for these people to look into if they ever realize why they came down to witness this killing. A sociopathic society?

The control angle is a fantasy. The evil had been diminished not one bit by John's departure from their midst, whatever they might believe. The good guys were not winning. The good guys couldn't win. If there were no bad guys, there wouldn't be any good guys. Try and explain that to your average citizen, lost in his own little empty-headed world. Try and explain that to anyone, for that matter. Lord knows, I've tried.

But that's what it's all about, isn't it? Our own little worlds. Every one of them is different, separate, and distinct. Don't fool yourself into believing otherwise; it's a waste of time. You live in your world, I live in mine, and never the twain shall meet. Period.

Gacy had his world -- right up until the end, he had it, wrapped tightly around him like a cocoon. They've been studying him for several years now, psychologists, psychiatrists, penal reformists; none of them seem able, or perhaps willing, to see the truth of it. They are trying to analyze an alien landscape by referencing the only thing they have to reference, their own little world. That's right. They can't see the light for the trees, so to speak -- their own trees.

Sometimes a whole group of worlds seem to align. This is what they call a society. It isn't a true picture,

either, but it lets the weak and unimaginative sleep better at night. When a group of people truly believe that what they see and what their neighbor sees in any given moment are the same, they have deluded themselves. If you give the same coffee, morning paper, and bus-ride to work to twelve different people, the entire scheme of events, actions, and reactions will be absolutely different in each case. Different worlds. Odds are, the criteria you use to ascertain this will be based on your own world, so I wouldn't trust your data much on this, either.

Take that newspaper we just mentioned, the one our "control" group read over breakfast. Let's say there's an article covering a killing on the front page -- top center, headline in bold print:

## Police Apprehend

### Alleged

### Kidnapper/Slayer of Three.

This story will not contain facts -- not by pure definition. It will contain the impression that society has agreed upon as fact -- the majority opinion.

It will not tell you why the killer's world required that these people be abducted and killed. It will not tell you how the police intersected their own reality with that of the criminal and brought him to justice, not

really. It will tell you what fits into the pseudo-world of society, and you will believe it, probably. It is the path of least resistance.

John's world is about to come to an end, as he knows it. The others, those who have studied, hated, died, and reviled it -- they will never know it at all. You can't enter another man's world. Therein lies the rub, so to speak. Even now, as I pontificate from my own, I know that every reaction to these words will be different, and that no two people will read them the same way, or with the same outcome. The difference is that I accept this -- to a point.

It hit me when I was still a child. Nobody really understood me. I was riding in the car with my mother, watching the houses go by, and it hit me like a sledgehammer to the center of the forehead. There were people in each and every one of those houses. Each of them lived a



separate life -- most of which would never, in any way, interact with my own. Each of them loved, hated, lived and lied -- alone. That was fine, as far as they were concerned, but that wasn't the end of it. It meant that I was alone as well.

Even in that ear, with my mother -- the closest human being to my universe to ever exist -- I was absolutely alone. I accept this now, as I've said, or at least I've come to somewhat of an understanding with it, but to a six year old boy it was a staggering revelation.

I tried to talk to my mother then, tried to explain the fear this concept had caused me -- tried to get her to explain it away and make things better. Wasn't happening. First she smiled at me, told me I was being silly. Then, when I continued to pester her with it, when I couldn't let it go -- she got angry. One car, two worlds. It felt as if the carpet had been yanked out from beneath my universe.

I was scared witless, frightened as I'd never been before. In the face of this, after hearing what had frightened me in my own words - or my explanation of those words as interpreted through the lens of my mother's world -- she felt amusement, then anger, but no fear, no understanding.

A friend of mine once recounted a similar experience. He was an artist, or could have been, if he'd stuck with it. He could draw like you wouldn't believe, and he could make the things he drew seem real. He was also obsessed, had been since he was a child.

He'd been drawing along, pretty as you please, forming vases and walls and doorways, learning the magic of perspective, when it hit him. There were no lines in or around the things he was drawing. On the paper, everything was separated from everything else by the dark borders of his pencil outlines. There were borders. There were limits. On the real wall, or around the real vase of flowers he'd been drawing, there were none.

"How can I draw," he wondered, "if there are no lines? If there are no lines, what keeps me from being part of that vase? What makes me different from the floor, or the pencil in my hand?"

Of course, his mother laughed. Of course, she next got angry - very similar world to my own mother, I'd say, though I'd of course be wrong. None of them are the same.

So there he was -- by the time I met him, 21 years old -- still trying to figure out how to draw without using any lines. He also still had the anxiety attacks that came with the knowledge that if there were no lines, there was nothing keeping things out of one another. I tried to explain to him that all of those things he wasn't separate from were in his own world anyway, and that as long as they were part of his world and not someone else's, it was nothing to worry about. Of course, he didn't understand. He never will, not the same way that I do.

There are certain moments that I remember more clearly than others. I read a lot -- mostly about people who seem caught up in their own little worlds. Serial killers are

all like that. Sociopaths, they call them. I call them realists. They understand that nothing beyond their own world matters. They understand that no matter how safe a society might seem, it only takes a small slip from the "norm" before they begin to hound and persecute you out of their own insecurity. A part of them knows the society is bullshit, but they mostly have that part locked away pretty deep inside. To look at them, you'd think they really did see the same things.

I read a book recently by a man named Straub, writing as a man named Underhill, writing about characters that may or may not have existed in the lives of one or the other of them. Worlds within worlds. In it, he mentions a photograph, front page of the *New York Times* the day after Ted Bundy was fried. I was obsessed, so I went and looked it up, and there it was. Louise Bundy, communicating for the last time with her son before his execution, their last connection immortalized.

That photograph is a perfect illustration of my concept. She was calling him from her own little world, of course, and in that world she believed that none of the places where her son's world and that of society had meshed were real. She believed that she could turn back the hands of the clock to the time when he was her "good boy."

He was never that person. That person was a figment of her own imagination, a construct that took the place in her own world inhabited by the world that was her true son. I wondered if he'd seen the houses along the road, as I had, or if he'd tried to draw the vases without lines. Maybe he just saw doorways into other people's worlds, and he went through them at will. He certainly seemed to be able to gain their trust. I think that Ted found a way out, if only for a little while, a way into other worlds. I think John found one too.

My own world becomes stagnant, at times. It would be refreshing to enter another, to understand how someone else understands, if you get my meaning.

Even if Louise Bundy could have maintained complete contact with her son throughout the execution, she would never have seen his world. No telling what might have happened in hers, though. Maybe old Teddy would've come waltzing in for the first time, face to face with his creator -- maybe he'd even have said "Heere's Johnny!" I'd kind of like to know for sure, but then, my impressions would never be quite the same as his, or hers, would they?

That same book I read, by Straub/Underhill/whoever, held another insight for me. All of the introspective writers have that quality. They make you think. Maybe things could be different. In Vietnam, says Underhill, he met a man named Dengler. The world they walked through over there, endless jungles, short little men who looked different and didn't operate in the "American" mode of "society," ate away at them. The "world," their term for reality back here at home, faded slowly into the background. The Earth itself made noises.

Dengler said, "I think that's what happens when you're out here long enough. The edges melt." Maybe he should have met my friend -- he could have found out that it's okay if they melt, there are no edges -- no lines, either.

The lines melt too. When you separate yourself long enough, concentrating on the only world that matters, your own, the lines on the vases disappear, the relationship of time to reality becomes less important, and the barriers melt away. Your world, in my world, is different. Your world in my world is mine. This is the fundamental truth that I have discovered in over thirty years of research, the fundamental truth that I can't even explain to you, but that is no less true. In my world, I am God. In my version of your world, I am God, still. John knew.

In John Wayne Gacy's world, the tiny universe of a man named after a big, slow -- talking actor who drank too much and didn't like black people, John Wayne Gacy, was God. He even constructed his own hell, beneath the floor of his home. That is one of the things that make me believe that he knew. I wonder if he stole the clown thing from Stephen King?

I read a lot, sorry to digress. I just wonder -- when the hodies were pulled from beneath his house, bloated and rotting -- did they hear a sinister, Tim Curry-esque voice floating up through the drain?

"Down here, we float... we all float."

Writers fascinate me. Within their own worlds, they create others, worlds within worlds, and they share them. We can't do that with our true worlds. When someone kills thirty -- three people and gets caught, they fry him and celebrate. When someone creates a serial killer in his mind, imagines that killer's life and thoughts as his own, if only for a short time, and puts it on paper, he is paid the big bucks and labeled as a genius. A creative talent.

Maybe it's just a payoff. Maybe they read about killers that can't hurt them, and they thank the writer for capturing the "evil" on the paper and not releasing it into "society." Maybe they just envy the writer his release. Or maybe they have just a hint of the desire that I have, the desire to find a way into other worlds.

One question about these writers remains, for me: do the edges melt when they write? Are they fully in their own world then, or do they create a new one that they can slip into at will, enjoying freedoms there that they are denied by the concept of society? Do the characters have

lines, or do they blend one to another? Is each character in "his" own little world? Gods in a pantheon? Good questions.

I tried writing myself. Thought I'd push the boundaries a little, see what came of a little creative hack and slash on the old keyboard. Nothing came of it. Either there is no magic there of the type I sought, or I just don't have the talent to bring it forth. Not that my plots were lacking. It was just that, whenever some creation of mine began to put his fingers around some young woman's throat, or to bash a particularly innocent young man's face against a wall, I did not want my fingers on the keys. I wanted my fingers wrapped in soft skin, or handed like steel across a pliant throat.

Description falls short of reality every time, and the visions in my head only screamed the louder for release as my fingers and mind failed to bind them to paper. The lines did not melt, they solidified. My characters were trapped within them, and even I could not set them free. I couldn't reach them at all. I was still stuck in my own little world, no help for it there.

For every question, I am told, there is an answer. I would modify that to say that for every question there are as many answers as there are people, or worlds, but it is sufficient to know that there is an answer for me. The question? How can I get into another man's world -- how can I become his God? It is possible that this is only happens at the moment of death, but somehow I believe there is another way. I am going to find out today --

tonight.

I've been working off that death angle for several years, and while it is satisfying in its own way, it is incomplete. I can become another man's God by destroying his world forever. This I know. I have seen it in their eyes, felt it seeping from wounds and rattling through throats on the heels of proverbial last breaths. In that moment, that final moment where they look into my eyes and truly see me, our worlds collide. That is also the shortcoming of death -- it is only a final moment. I want more than that.

That is why I stood there, watching and waiting, moving with the crowd as it lived and breathed a separate life of its own, a temporary bonding of all those souls who just couldn't keep away. It is a life-form more closely aligned with Gacy's own world than they might believe. They have all come here expecting -- praying, even -- for



one thing. They want a man to die. They want to be the pantheon that rules his world. They want it for their own.

Granted, he was a dangerous man by any standards, particularly those of "society," but a man nonetheless. A man with vision beyond their own. Watching the hungry looks on their faces as they waited, I was reminded of the gladiators in Rome.

There's a visual for you.

Gacy and Dahmer at forty paces, silverware to the death — battle until the second course is served. It might help pay for all those people languishing in the prison system, their own worlds shrinking in around them until they take up no more space or energy than a parking space. It might also prove another interesting study into the way those who gather to watch executions react to violent entertainment.

In two hours, give or take a minute or two, John Wayne Gacy will cease to exist. I will not. His world will be vacant, or what his world represents in my own, and I will step in. I have essentially already done so. That simple. Gacy is out, I am in. The sequel.

It's taken a lot of planning, but, hey, what have I got but time? The house wasn't so tough. His plans were on file with the city, just like any others, and the diagrams in the magazine spreads and the paper made re-creation of the "hell" beneath it all a snap. Maybe, since hell is in place already, I'll put a little effort into heaven -- for the truly good ones, of course. It's a thought.

Stagnancy is not the goal. I believe he was on the right track, making progress, and I plan to pick up where he left off. It will be my interpretation of his world, of course, but I've been pretty thorough, and I believe it will be close enough. I think I can work myself in before everything snaps shut, before his world is banished to the ether. His world, my insight -- the sky is the limit.

I find that the folks in the Jaycees are a friendly bunch. They took me right in, especially when they saw how many hours of volunteer service they could wring out of me. Upstanding citizen. Fund raiser. Not a family man, yet, or a father, but I have all the time in the world -- John's world. He won't be using it. I thought about sending him a thank you note, but why ruin his last few hours? Let him die the God he was in life -- if I'm right, he'll know soon enough -- he'll be with me, and we'll be out of life.

The crowd surged forward near the end, but I bung back. Nothing to see from the outside, anyway, and I have other things to do, other worries. I've been careful with the paint, base -- coat of white, big red balls for cheeks and three colors of blue lining the outside of my eyes in stars (always wanted them to say I had stars in my eyes). My face is even registered -- painted on an egg-shell and registered as mine, and mine alone. They do that for you when you graduate clown school. Not an easy thing to do, in reality. There's more to the world of a clown than most people realize. Certainly more than I realized. Everyone might love a clown, but they don't necessarily love themselves. Not all the frowns on clowns are painted on, believe me. More of those masks are really hiding something than not. Another revelation.

Another insight as well. A new face, a new world? Construction worker face, society world. Clown face, surreal world. John's "real" face? Only dead men can explain that one to you, dead men, and maybe John himself, and he's still claiming innocence.

Some of the people brought their children to the execution. Pretty tacky, I say, but what the heck? What's the lesson here, it's bad to kill? It's fun to watch people die? Beware the Boogey Man? I don't really care what their motives were in making it a family affair; it gives me a chance to practice.

Maybe you saw me on the news the day after. I was carrying a sign

— there were other clowns there besides myself, we all had signs. Mine was painted bright orange and red. Clown colors. "Clowns Make People Laugh, John," mine says. Nobody is laughing at John. The children smile when they look my way, but nobody is really laughing at me today, either. That's fine.

My little hell is waiting at home, and there is plenty of time. They will see me, and they will laugh. When I wear the clown face, live in the clown world, they will find me funny as hell. Others will come to me, and they will work with me at the little construction firm I've started -- only a sub-contracting business, so far, but with plans for expansion. They will trust me, and they will drink with me in my construction worker world, and when I put on the paint and prance for their children, they will laugh at me too.

In the end, I will steal their worlds. I will be their God. It will be simple -- everybody loves a clown.  $\Omega$

*(For Wayne Allen Sallee)*





*Heaven's just a rumor she'll dispel  
as she walks me through the nicest parts of hell,*  
— Nine Inch Nails, "Sanctified"

This column is about pleasure.

My pleasure lies in dark fiction. From Clive Barker's edgy fantasies to Dennis Cooper's violations of narrative and flesh, I seek writers who disturb me. Twist my preconceived ideas. Force me to re-envision the world, if only for the space of a story.

I look for stories that cut beneath the socially accepted surface. Stories that get to the real stuff. That melt down the mannered politics of everyday to show the true face behind our well-kept facades.

Meat. Blood. Goop.

Maybe, as my Aussie goth pal Gerry would say, it's a Scorpio thing.

At any rate, you won't find many reviews of supermarket horror here. Horror that scares you only to underscore some hoary notion of morality. Horror that punches the fear button only to return you safe and sound to whatever cosy vision of the universe you embarked with.

On the other hand, I'm sick of that other kind of provincialism, hipster horror that proclaims its outlaw status by virtue of its author's multiple piercings and tattoos. Let's get real. It's the work that counts, not the 'tude or the sunglasses after dark.

Real horror plays it unsafe at every level. If it does its job it should cut right to the heart of fear, whether you dress in a three-piece suit or a faded Slayer t-shirt. The monsters that rustle in our skulls know no boundaries of gender, class or politics.

And as author John Skipp points out, the New Horror Revolution really began when the monsters started telling the story.

I heartily agree.

Let's listen in...

## **Darkside: Horror for the Next Millenium**

Edited by John Pelan

Darkside Press 1996

4128 Woodland Park Ave. N.

Seattle, Washington 98104

481 pp.

Edition Limited to 400 copies: \$60.

Deluxe Edition Limited to 52 copies: \$125.

**Darkside: Horror for the Next Millenium** offers a selection of thirty all-new stories from some truly radical voices in contemporary horror. Read as a "spectralgraph" of the state of the art in dark fiction, this anthology suggests that horror is moving further away from the "Us vs. Them" mentality of tradition, and closer to the fragmented specificity of personal hells -- an Inferno for every head.

For example: in Caitlin R. Kieman's "Tears Seven Times Salt," a woman follows her grandmother's tale of her origins -- that she was abandoned by fish people beneath Manhattan -- back to the sea, body infected from hundreds of deliberate wounds. Kieman's shimmering poetic style and haunting imagery take this story beyond the school of avant-horror cliche that valorizes artsy, self-destructive boho derelicts. Fine work. As is James S. Dorr's "The Tears of Isis," in which a sculptress comes to embody her masterpiece, a self-portrait as the archetypal symbol of bereaved motherhood.

Thomas Ligotti's brilliant cyber-noir "The Nightmare Network" relates a future in which two mega-corporations working in dream-space and virtual reality mutate into a single entity. Reminiscent of William Burroughs and William Gibson at their paranoid, extrapolative best, this story shows horror at its furthest reaches. Another exploration into the dark voids of cyberspace, Roberta Lannes' "Stealing the Sisyphus Stone" depicts an experimental VR procedure to cure pedophilia, only it's programmed by two individuals who may be sicker than their subject.

Stories by Robert J. Levy and Jeffrey Osier, among others, put contemporary relationships under a microscope. Levy's "Skinwriters" tells of the symbiosis that develops between a poet and a "performance photographer," a woman whose ultrasensitive skin bruises at the slightest touch. A collaborative project in which the poet literally creates a poem-cycle on her skin turns codependent and obsessive when he realizes he can't write without her. It's a sharp metaphor for the way relationships grow sick when partners can't grow without each other. Osier's "For the Curiosity of Rats" gives us a married couple and their dead child, whose memory the wife preserves in the child's last urination. Her husband belittles the idea of "haunted urine" only to realize, too late, its symbolic importance to her.

Of course, no collection of this kind would be complete without its complement of full-bore splatter, provided here by Edward Lee. To those unfamiliar with Lee's previous outings (*Creekers*, *Header*, *The Chosen*), be forewarned: he's not for the faint of stomach. "The Stick Woman" relates the stages of torture to which a millionaire subjects his hapless wife. Mutilation, coprophilia and bestiality porn are only some of the treats in store for her, though the cruellest blow comes at the end. Mistress of Excess Lucy Taylor weighs in with "Scars," which trims her trademark ultraviolence in this story of a psychotic young man from Zimbabwe whose dream-demon, the "Tokoloshe," takes a disturbingly real form. Though muted for Taylor, this story deftly threads together her themes of sexual horror, psychological aberrance and supernatural exoticism.

**Darkside: Horror for the Next Millenium** rewards the reader with a uniformly excellent selection of stories. If you can afford the price of the ticket (I admit, it's damn steep), you won't find much better.

## Noirotica: An Anthology of Erotic Crime Stories

Edited by Thomas S. Roche

Masquerade Books 1996

319 pp., \$6.95

San Francisco-based writer Thomas Roche makes his editorial debut with *Noirotica*. This anthology injects the hardboiled crime genre with a healthy dose of smut. (Not surprising -- Roche and I were boyhood j.d.'s, cutting classes to swig Jolt Cola from paper bags, rocking out to his definitive collection of Floyd albums. . .but that's another column.)

Kidding aside, *Noirotica* succeeds through sheer entertainment value. It doesn't take itself all that seriously, and there's more good stories for your reading dollar than found in many prestige anthologies blaring big-name authors from the cover, delivering less bang than whimper. While not horror, *Noirotica* contains many notable names, such as Lucy Taylor, Nancy Kilpatrick and Nancy Collins, whose work blur the boundaries between horror, mystery and erotica.

Roche's own fiction (try it in such anthologies as *Splatterpunks 2* and *Hot Blood 8*) revels in ambisexual postmodern gender-blending, and this approach carries through many of the tales in this volume.

Robin Sweeney's "Fogtown" plays out the classic *noir* scenario -- hardbitten P.I. takes on femme fatale client -- in dyke drag. In Amelia G.'s "Rocket Queen," a tough-as-nails hit woman dallies with her prey, a young collegiate male. Yet another archetypal twist, Simon Sheppard's "The Big Black Dildo" takes its gay male protagonists through a locked-room murder case involving the death of a hustler and the titular (ahem) implement of pleasure.

In Nancy Collins' "Such a Good Baby," (originally printed in Stan Wiater's *After the Darkness*) a hooker impregnated by her pimp must kill a vice cop to keep her kid. Only nothing in this story is what it seems. It's a slight addition to Collins' bibliography, but packs a lightning punch. Nancy Kilpatrick's tough New Orleans cop has never found a man to satisfy her, until "The Case of the Demon Lover," where she finds sexual release in St. Louis Cemetery #1, head against a grave, body proffered freely to a dashing incubus. The story is politically incorrect as they come, and hot as hell.

*Noirotica's* setpiece is Danielle Willis' "Tiffany's Shitty Night." Willis deftly sketches the milieu of a second-rate nudie bar, in which a burned-out stripper subject to progressive humiliations finally revenges herself on a boorish client. Willis' eye for detail and satirical obversations (from first-hand experience) of the sex-trade demimonde make this story worth the price of the book.

Other treats in this volume include Bill Brent's "Dick Death: Punk Detective," an otherwise straightforward procedural set in a world of punk rock and polymorphous sexual depravity. Violet Hemlock's "Shopping" tells of two young gays who pick up a street hustler for an evening of heroin abuse and cannibalism. Hemlock's deadpan style renders this story chillingly funny.

And speaking of deadpan. . ."Saved," by Poppy Z. Brite and Christa Faust (reprinted from Mike Baker's *Young Blood*) is a piece to be savored. The phallic symbolism of guns is lent literal meaning when a young man's sordid encounter with a transvestite hooker named Jesus leads to sex and murder. The dark humor of this piece may evade readers who can't get over its climax, involving an antique Luger and Vaseline. But then, *Noirotica* isn't exactly pitched at the *Bridges of Madison County* set, either.

Until next time, when we delve further into the outlands of fictional decadence, have fun, be good and happy reading!

# CHANCE MEETING

## “B”

The familiar \*ting!\*

As the doors whoosh open, an awareness of the canvas rope straining on the soft flesh of the left wrist becomes evident. Again, the newspaper can offer only a minor diversion. Especially with its ugly headline.

Funny, comes the thought, *it's a little late for a repairman*. The weight is shifted from left foot to right, heel to toe to avoid the little pins and needles of fatigue. The laundry bag's weight shifts too, almost leaning forward enough to spill free the plastic detergent bottle. A jerk of the irritated wrist moves the cord, free to pester fresh skin, but the bag returns to its upright position.

1 . . . 3 . . .

The doors close with no other entrants and a silent sigh escapes. Ten hours behind the counter and two hours of laundry have created a thankfulness for lack of company and the fewest possible stops. Not much of a smell for gear jockey. Especially this late. Funny, comes the thought, *it is late for a repairman*.

4 5 6 \*ting!\*

The doors open, stick a little in the middle, spit out a noise of effort and split apart. The hallway is empty. Each party gives a little lean towards the middle, a brief glance and a shrug. A look is exchanged, the first, and the repairman stabs at the number 13 for a second time. The numeral 18 remains lit and seems an eon and a mile away.

Pretty clean uniform, too.

The hat reads "New York Boiler Company," embroidered on the crisp brown corduroy. The uniform is brown, too, with a few old stains too tough for Tide to have removed.

Must be new, even the workbooks look clean. So does the workbelt. There are smudges of oil and mystery sludge on the pale leather, but no frays or torn loops. The hammer, wire cutters, screwdrivers, all seem to be neat and in order.

Maybe he's new. . .

7 8

More noises. Louder this time and most definitely mechanical. There's an echo from somewhere above, a clattering of chains and pulley-like devices. It's as if Jacob Marley was taking a walk down the very shaft itself.

9 10 11 12 \*ting!\*

Another sigh escapes, this one not so silent, not so hidden. A glance from the repairman and a smile. A knowing smile. It's late, especially for a repairman, and so the smile must be knowing. After ten hours behind the counter and two hours in the ramshackle laundry room,

## Joseph Monks

with no air-conditioning and the stale smell of hot dryer air permeating virtually everything, the shared knowledge, "Overtime's a bitch," is understood, even though unspoken.

The absence of fresh air is, within an instant, unsettling. The repairman is shifting his weight now, heel to toe, toe to heel with a certain minor impatience. The doors have not opened.

*No way, the thought comes, the laundry bag and the rope pulling at the flesh are forgotten, as are the pins and needles traveling up through the soles of the feet, no way, not tonight...*

Both sigh at the familiar mechanical jerk. The car restarts its upward climb. The repairman jabs at the lit 13 button several times, normally an annoying and useless action. Tonight it is welcome.

*Very clean hands and fingers.*

*Especially for a repairman.*

12 13

Grinding. A slow discontinuation of motion. Neither button is lit, and again, the doors do not part.

*Oh shit. . .*

Pressing the buttons proves fruitless, and the repairman cedes the loss after a few moments. He turns and sighs, faces his companion. Both lean against opposite walls of the car.

Exasperation is evident. The cord around the wrist is shrugged free. Somewhere, far below, there is a dull buzzing that each can only assume is the alarm, one of the buttons pressed with futile urging moments earlier.

Yet another sigh. Eyes are focused skywards although the lids are shut tight. The thought comes, *Hey, a repairman. . .*

"I wish I knew something about these things," he states, his words spoken as casually as if he had read her mind. But he hasn't. He's only staring at the panel where the emergency phone has been torn out, looking at a meaningless jumble of multi-colored wiring and electrical tape, remnants from decades of past repair.

Then he looks back and speaks, "I see he did it again."

"Pardon?"

"Your newspaper, I was just noticing that he, uh, he'd done it again."

There's really no need to glance at the front cover again, but reflex requires it. The headline is bold and black and the photo, a sheet stained dark over several areas covering the curves and contours of a body, stare right back with invisible penetrating eyes. The ugly topic of conversation, so prevalent at the service desk earlier in the day today, has known, again, returned.

"Oh, yeah." Feeble and quiet.



"Wonder what it's going to take to catch him?"

"I'm sure the police are doing their best."

"Yeah, but he seems to be pretty good at it."

"Good at it? That sounds so, so . . . unusual."

There's a soft laugh, a chuckle.

"Yeah," the repairman responds after quick reflection. "Guess you're dead right about that."

Was the pun intentional? The question didn't need to be asked. For the second time eye contact was made and brief silence ensued.

"What do you think?"

"Think?"

"About catching him. Think they will?" The question seemed more like a challenge, as if he had some bizarre camaraderie which existed with the creature who had been terrorizing the city for so many weeks. The repairman seemed almost ready to identify with the hunted as if the situation were a motion picture, where the killer was somehow . . . sympathetic?

"I think it will be very difficult for them."

"So, you think he's pretty good at it, too, huh?"  
The look is not just a look or a glance or eye contact any longer. It has the cold pride of a leer as the repairman stares.

*Is there actually pride behind those eyes? Would anyone feel pride about someone murdering nine women and not yet being caught? Was there some mantle upheld in dismembering bodies and using foreign devices to sexually violate the corpses? What kind of person could defend such heinous actions, much less find some sort of macho honor in it?*

*It is far too late, came the thought, for this repairman to be out.*

"Pretty horrible stuff he does, too," came his next offering. Perhaps, just perhaps, he was playing the game, striking up the grisly conversation to play out the "Can I buy you a drink? I sure need one" scenario.

"So I've read."

"Yeah? Well, I got a friend on the force, says that what the papers get isn't the half of it."

"Oh, really?" The tone was definite. There was no element of curiosity displayed, only a low lever of quiet disdain. There was no need to know more.

"Yeah, says this guy isn't really playing the sex angle at all. It's strictly about the killing. He's not your Jack the Ripper type like the papers have been saying. This guy's a regular Friday the 13th character. I know it's really sick, but my friend told me this guy took the last girl's nipples off with a wirecutter. It's crazy. The whole world is going down the toilet."

*There was no immediate recognition of anything out of the ordinary. But why would a boiler mechanic have electrical tools on his workbelt? What was he doing with his own wirecutter?*

*Swallow and a breath. The thing to remember, is that there's no need to think anything is out of the ordinary.*

*Late for a repairman.*

*Even though the conversation is very, very one sided.*

*A very clean repairman.*

*At any moment, the doors will be opening. Was the alarm buzzer still sounding? It didn't seem to be. Had he really pressed it, or was that something which had only been imagined? Or had he just made it look as if the button had been pressed?*

"Could you?" he asks.

"Could I?"

"Do you think you could?

"Could what?"

"Kill? That way? Do you think you could do something like that?"

The fingers of the repairman's right hand rub together, thumb to fore and middle finger. He's anxious, awaiting the response. He's brought things this far, the response must be correct.

*Very, very late for a repairman...*

"I guess if I had to, I could."

The eye contact remains cold. The car jerks for a moment, and then there is silence, leaving an uneasy quiet

between the two. Somewhere, far below, there's another grinding noise, and the whir of mechanics.

12 13

Both numerals light up.

"If I met this killer, if I had to. . . I do believe I could."

The repairman stands staggering momentarily as the car jerks to life and motion is regained. The cord of the laundry bag is swiftly back around the wrist and the newspaper folded in half.

13 \*tiling!\*

"Here." The newspaper is offered and for the last time their eyes meet.

"Oh, thanks."

"Well, you are working late."

*And on the 13th floor.*

"Oh, I'm not working here. I live here, just moved in."

"Oh, well, nice meeting you."

"Uh, yeah, see ya," he finishes before the door closes.

14 15 16 17

The sigh is loud and long. The cord at the top of the laundry bag is pulled tight and a noticeable shudder passes.

18 \*tiling!\*

The hallway is empty, but there's still an extra glance each way to confirm the presence of no one else. Once through the door it is locked by the double deadbolt and by key, before the lights are even turned on. The laundry bag lands on the couch-bed with a thud, spilling most of its contents onto the plastic sheeting halled up beside copies of all the metropolitan dailies, save for the one sacrificed to the "repairman."

Too late for a boiler repairman.

On the 13th floor.

The floor used for tenant storage since there were no apartments on it.

It had been soooo close, this time.

The edges of razor sharp scissors clip and trim each and every article, each and every mention of the media-dubbed "New York Ripper." Cut to size, they find space more easily in the hard backed photo album which serves as a scrapbook.

"Too late for a repairman, but not a maid," she says aloud, sorting a plastic case from the other contents of the laundry bag.

The nipples had dried swiftly and intact, remaining hard and erect in the see-through baggie. These will not flatten when pressed into the scrapbook, she decides, and grins with the success.

The wirecutters go back into a box beneath the sink, and the television goes on.

11 o'clock.

Not too late for the evening news.

Ω

# DEAD ART

*Works of art are of an infinite loneliness . . .  
Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them.*

—Rilke

## I. Artist and Canvas

He washes her first, a good, hard scrubbing that takes off the dead, top layer of skin. Ironic, that thought. As if one part of her is more dead than other parts. As if death is nothing more than the inevitable collapse of all our defenses, so that the death we all carry on the outside eventually sinks through to our insides.

They brought her to him quickly enough, rigor mortis having set and gone already, leaving her pliant to his soapy brushes and sponge. He's careful to wash all her secret places: between her toes and behind her ears, the soft white crease under each breast, her navel, her nostrils, her eyelids and rectum and neck. With pliers he removes all her nails, then tenderly cleans the debutante-pink flesh he's revealed. With tiny scissors, he trims her now ragged cuticles, until each of her ten digits ends in a blunt and polished alien pad, smooth on top, concentrically crenulated on the bottom.

He takes a razor and begins at her feet. He shaves the fine pale hair on the top of her toes and her feet, moving onward and upward to meet the coarser stubble of her legs. He's careful around the ankles and knees, mindful of the razor's edge against the thin, bone-taut skin there. The hair on her thighs where she traditionally stopped shaving is so fine as to be almost invisible. It slides away from the razor like a film of soap. With scissors, he removes most of the hair from her groin, then follows up with the razor, pulling on her bath-moist labia so that he can get at all the stubble in that tender region between her legs. He follows a trail of down up her belly, around her navel (where he finds a mole with a single dark hair that he plucks with tweezers), around the arc of her rib cage, and between her breasts which sport the same fine blond hair he encountered on her thighs. Her shoulders. Her neck. Her face. With shears, he removes most of the hair from her head. The razor completes the job.

Then he turns her over and does the other side.

When he's done, he washes her again.

She's now clean and pristine. The only hair left on her body is her eyelashes and the hair in her nose. The latter he leaves. Her eyelashes, he plucks one by one. When they're all out, he sews her eyes shut with surgical thread, pulling the thread from the inside where it can't be seen. He does the same with her mouth.

By this time, he's been bent over the table for three hours and his back is killing him. He's not as young as he used to be. He curls up on the damp, soiled floor beneath the table, shivering now that he's not working, not

## Brian A. Hopkins

occupied with his art. His joints ache with arthritis as much as fatigue. He's spent too many years in this freezer. But once started, he never leaves them. If there were room on the table, he would sleep at her side. Lacking that, the concrete floor will do. They're not meant to be alone, these souls in his trust. He can only imagine their terror at being alone, at being incapacitated, impotent, abandoned...dead.

Two hours later apprentices bring him food. Simple fare. Cold cheese and sausage. A glass of milk — which is all he allows himself when he's working. While he eats, his apprentices set up the inks and needles. Another begins the base layer of acrylic. They should really pour the acrylic in a cleaner room, but he insists it all be done here under his supervision ... and hers. It means more work for the apprentices; they'll have to clean and polish the surface of the base before she's placed upon it and the balance poured over her, but it's a minor inconvenience.

When he's finished eating, he lets his hands roam her flesh, learning what he can. There's a small scar on her chin (a childhood spill from that first bicycle?) and another on one knee (long and jagged, as if made by the tooth of an angry dog). He noticed them both while preparing her, but now he truly studies their topography: the way the original flesh flows around the swollen tissue of the scar, the arrangement of pores, the texture and color variations. He plays phrenologist, exploring the shape of her skull. He shifts her breasts for best effect. Arranges her hands. Explores her intimately and surmises that she never bore children. Her palms reveal no hard use. He knows she came from money — otherwise she would never have been brought to him — but still, sometimes, you find that even the rich enjoy a callous-rendering hobby. So she was pampered and kept (the soft deposits around her middle tell him that), fit for another five or six years, he estimates, before life would have caught up with her and she would either exercise or endure liposuction.

He starts with her head, working the inks under the skin with his needles, dabbing with paper towels as she bleeds preservatives, following finished patches of the mosaic with swipes of a Vaseline coated tongue depressor. He injects her flesh with color, painting her life as it had been told him by husband and friends, as it had been interpreted by his questing hands and artist's intuition. Her colors are bright. No earth-tone woman, this. No mother. No auntie. This was a woman of parties, of late nights, of cocktails and sequins and bright lights. The strokes he uses are bold and presumptuous, as forthright and in-your-face as he knew she must have been.

Time passes. When he's tired, he sleeps. When apprentices bring him food, he eats it. Beneath the unwavering fluorescents of the freezer, it's impossible to tell

how long it takes, but its span is measured in days, not hours. He paints every inch of her, turning her this way and that, the images following the contours of her body but telling of her soul. When he's done, he kisses her painted forehead, then stands aside as the apprentices move her to the waiting slab of acrylic.

He supervises as they put up the forms and carefully — oh so carefully, lest there be air bubbles — pour on the remaining acrylic. Through the translucent forms, he can still see her, but her image is murky and cloud-puffy with hardening polymers. Hardly the work of art her husband commissioned. But when the forms come off and the encasing, sheltering, immortalizing acrylic runs clear as glass, she will be perfect . . . forever.

The apprentices leave him alone with her and he collapses, beyond exhaustion. His vigil won't end until her cocoon has cured, another eight hours. There remains, however, one final task. He retrieves needles and ink, removes his shirt, and looks for a bare stretch of skin on which to remember her.

## II. Art and Audience

The multitude of voices in the gallery don't penetrate the acrylic, but the stares do. Faces file by, linger with open-mouthed awe. Hesitant, near-reverent fingers trace the crystal block as if they can feel the lines of tattooing. A crowd gathers, and as their lips move, it's easy to imagine what they're saying:

"It's a genuine Ransom, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes! Much better than those imitations across the hall. The guy's a genius."

"Genius? You ladies oughta have your heads examined." The two women appraise this cowboy-type who has come to the fore, their eyes as sharp and cold as the diamonds adorning their digits, wrists, and necklines. "Tell you what I think --" They both knew he would; it's written on their faces. "-- I think he's a goddamn psycho!"

"Oh, no sir, not Herbert Ransom. Now Moog . . . Moog, he's psychotic. All those rearranged pieces. Butchery is all it is. Moog acts out his fantasies on cadavers."

"God, Moog is disgusting. Katie, did you see the guy with the penis where his nose should be?"

"Sick! And what about Chapman's reanimated series? Did you see that? Or Pruitt's 'Study of the Amputee'? How do some of these artists sleep at night?"

"It's all sick, ladies." The cowboy runs a beefy finger along the brim of his hat as if making some minute adjustment. The one called Katie watches the gesture with sudden fascination. She looks as if she's just realized where she misplaced something valuable. "The dead should be used for fertilizer, not mutilated and displayed

"Oh, no. This is art, people." A new face crowds up to the acrylic's surface, this one in an Italian suit and hundred dollar tie. The only thing he probably has in common with the cowboy is the money in his pocket

"You're all three missing the point. Think of the talent it took to transfer that penis. Not a single seam. To look at it, you'd have thought the guy was born that way."

"I still say it's sick. What I wonder is — what sorts people contribute their loved ones for these things?"

"Moog probably collects homeless beggars and files disposal rights. If no one comes forward in ten days, the corpse is his, isn't that right, Betty? Betty knows these things, she works down town at the Bureau."

"That's right. It all started with those damn organ donor laws. Find a body, get a new kidney. Kinda says something about society, doesn't it, Katie?"

"No more so than this tattooed nightmare," retorts the cowboy. "I certainly wouldn't want my daughter, or sister, or mother -- or whatever she was to the person who commissioned this -- used for some sick paint-by-numbers exhibit." He's moved closer to Katie and she to him.

"No, you just don't get it. Look at her. It's all there in the ink. Her whole life. It's like some sort of spiral galaxy, the events and the connections and the components of her life swirling out around her. She's the center. All these other people, all these incidents revolve around her. She was the center of their universe . . . and now they are without her."

"Shit, what we got here is one of them dead art impressionists, ladies. Kinda fella thinks he sees purpose in a pile of dogshit. I'm leaving before he spews some on my boots."

"Katie, you're not going too, are you?" There's an unspoken level of communication between the two women as they separate, a meet- you-at-the-bar-in-a-couple-hours relayed on some telepathic level. Betty understands that Katie and the cowboy have reacted to the exhibits on some instinctive level. Death dares them to defy his presence, to deny his breath on the neck of every visitor in the packed gallery. Sex is an instinctive defense. See me, Death? If I can enjoy this, you're a long way from being on my appointment book.

Betty is disappointed that she is left with the art critic, the thinker, the one too aesthetically sensitive and hormonally insensitive to recognize that she's also ready to leave. With him.

"Let them go. They don't get it. They don't see that whoever asked Ransom to do this loved this woman more than anything in the world."

"And wanted us to see her like this?"

"Maybe not. Maybe he had no choice. Part of Ransom's standard contract says he gets to display the work for an initial period. She'll be here a week, two at the most, then she'll be secreted away somewhere where only the people featured in these tattoos can view her."

"But to shave her and . . . display her nude like that --"

"Don't you see that Ransom needed every inch of canvas? This woman was connected to a lot of people."

"And all of them marched into Ransom's studio and posed for this? I think the guy's a genius, but I'm only



willing to go so far, pal. Come on, he makes these images up for those of us who don't know any better."

"They say he's intuitive, empathetic even. He interviews everyone he can before he starts the job, but in the end he takes most of what he needs from the corpse. They say he has an 'intimacy with the dead.'"

"Creepy."

"Yeah. Perhaps that's what makes his art, and all the art in this gallery, so popular."

"Maybe we're looking for the opportunity to touch death?"

"Or immortality."

"She looks so young. How do you suppose she died?"

"Didn't you see it in the paper and on the news? She drowned in some kind of boating accident."

"Oh." As if that explained something. She taps the acrylic with a manicured fingernail. "How long will she last in there?"

"No air . . . pumped full of preservatives . . . I'd guess, maybe, forever."

### III. Loneliness and Judgement

The night holds the garden in a skeletal silence so complete it seems even the insects are loathe to intrude upon it. Herbert Ransom has come like a thief over the garden wall to his customer's study. He stands now outside the open veranda door, in the shadows, in the half light, in the judicial black of the monochrome realm where he, the artist, comes like a god, a god of color. He watches as his customer inspects the acrylic block, running

tentative, trembling fingers across the polished surface. Herbert Ransom runs his own hands beneath his shirt, feeling the landscape of textures spread across his stomach and chest. Where his shirt gaps and the flesh beneath is touched by the light from the study, colors are born to challenge the night.

The customer weeps, spreading his tears across the acrylic surface. The tears bead there, dispelling the illusion that he and his dead wife are separated by a foot of water. He shudders and begins to weep uncontrollably. "I'm sorry," he whispers, but not so low that Ransom can't hear.

Clearing his throat, Ransom steps from the shadows.

The husband looks up, wiping at his eyes. He seems unsurprised to find the artist at his door.

"Is the work satisfactory?" Ransom asks.

"Satisfactory?" The husband touches the acrylic and methodically moves from scene to scene across the tattooed panorama. "How could you have known all these things?"

Ransom doesn't answer.

The husband gestures toward the face of a dark and attractive man occupying real estate on his wife's chest, just above her left breast, that spot where she would place her hand if asked to put it over her heart. "How could you have ever known about him?" The dark man's face is caught looking back over his left shoulder, his eyes and mouth set in an expression of incongruent surprise and expectation. It was exactly the way she remembered him best. Exactly as he'd looked that first night she'd called him back when he'd made to leave the bar.

"I wasn't going to keep her, you know," continues the husband. "I was going to send her . . . to him. I thought that . . . that when you were finished and all the important things about our life together -- our life before he came along -- were laid out there on her flesh, that I'd send her to him. See what you did? I would ask. You destroyed all this. You were nothing to her. But," he sobs and slaps angrily at the tattooed face of the dark man. "There the son of a bitch is and . . . how can I send her to him now? Right there he is. Right there near her heart.

"And it's me who's left to ponder my own significance in her life." He looks up then and finds some strength in the ambivalence writ upon the artist's face. He wipes his eyes, screws his face into an indignant frown, and asks, "What the hell are you doing here anyway?"

Ransom removes his shirt and lets it drop to the floor.

"Oh my God."

There, on the artist's breast: the long, gondola-like boat, the moon and the swamp and the hacklit cypress trees, the pole in the husband's hands, and the white turnmoor where the pole enters the water. Beneath the water, at the end of the pole, a face twisted in terror.

# BACK BONE

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Stephen Dedman** lives in Perth, Australia. His first novel, *The Art of Arrow Cutting* is being published by Tor Books this fall. His short stories have appeared in *Little Deaths*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Alien Shores* and *Terror Australis*. Thank goodness for email from Oz, or I'd never have gotten to know him or his bizarre fiction.

**Ian Grey**, as you can probably tell from his column biography earlier in this issue, knows a lot about strange movies and videos. Maybe too much. Perhaps that accounts for his weird fiction?

**Brian Hopkins** has sold fiction to Aboriginal Science Fiction, *The Midnight Zoo*, *Adventures Of Sword & Sorcery*, *Deathrealm*, *After Hours*, *Terminal Fright* and the usual "more." A collection of his horror stories, *Something Haunts Us All*, was published this year by Macabre, Inc. (517 Massachusetts Av, Norfolk, VA 23508) A sci-fi/horror novella, *Cold At Heart* will be published as a trade paperback next spring by Stanlake. In real life he does something that involves traveling and talking to generals. Finally. Someone worthwhile to spend our tax dollars on.

**Del James** writes stories, screenplays, lyrics, is working on a novel, is a senior editor for *Rip* magazine and has a lot of really great tattoos. Whenever I run into fans of Del's they say stuff like, "Man, Del James rules!" Well, they are right. He does. Read his collection, *Language of Fear* (Dell) and find out why.

**Joseph Monks** began writing and publishing with the now defunct *Cry For Dawn*, a comic title that was an underground cult phenomena that continues to attract fans and collectors. Monks now publishes, writes and edits *NightCry* (which he terms his "true love") along with publishing other titles from CFD Productions.

**Yvonne Navarro's** novels, *Afterage* and *deadrush* were both nominated by the Horror Writers Association for Bram Stoker Awards. Her short fiction has been published since 1984 in all sorts of anthologies and magazines. Her latest novel, *Final Impact* will be published early next year by Baen. She drinks Zima and looks damn good in spandex. Did I mention her new book, *Final Impact*? It used to be called something else, but *Final Impact* is what you will be looking for next February. That title is *Final Impact*.

**Carol D. Page** is a Clinton graduate, published poet and has been nominated for the Rhysling Award from the Science Fiction Poetry Association. She also writes film and book reviews as well as being the poetry editor of *Terra Incognita*.

**Bradley Sinor** did not write any fiction for this issue, but, unlike the other non-fiction writers, he didn't get a bio printed with his contribution, the Poppy Britz interview. So he gets squeezed in here. His non-fiction has appeared in *Starlog*, *Weird Tales*, *Tuff Stuff*, *Baby Boomer Collectibles* and other places. His short fiction has been in the *Merovingian Nights* series and *The Time of the Vampires*.

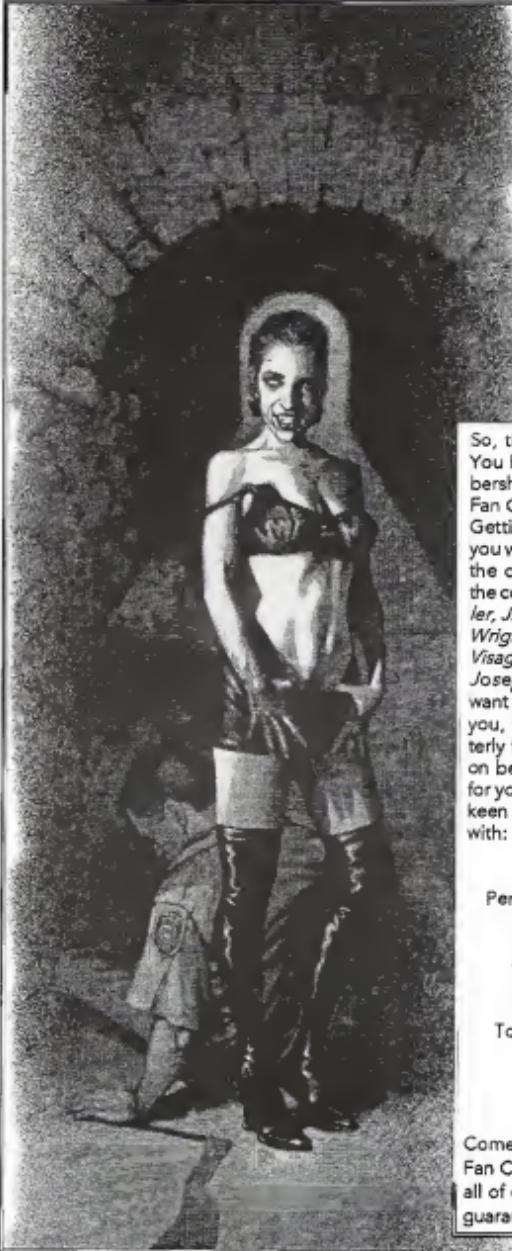
**John Shirley** is one of the most remarkable writers of speculative fiction in the last two decades. He was the first and, until he pushed William Gibson into writing SF and a bunch of "nice middle-class white guys" got into it, the "only cyberpunk science fiction writer in the world."

His body of work includes more than a dozen novels, including *Wetbones*; numerous short stories that defy most labels, (some of them collected in *Heatseeker* and *New Noir*) as well as screenplays for TV and film.

*City Comes A-Walkin'*, the progenitive novel of cyberpunk has recently been re-released by Eyeball Books (PO Box 18539, Asheville, NC 28814) as has a new collection, *The Exploded Heart*. A new novel, *The Silicon Embrace*, will soon be out from Mark V. Zeising. Buy them. Read them. Period.

**Steve Rasnic Tem** has written and published so many short stories he has probably lost count. Maybe he hasn't, but I have. You'll run across some of them in places like Robert Bloch's *Psycho Paths*, Asimov's *Science Fiction Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, *Metahorror*, *The Ultimate Dracula*, *Love in Vein*, *Forbidden Acts* and many more.

**David Niall Wilson** has been called "one of the hottest names in small press horror." Probably by Dave, but it's true. Over 70 short stories have appeared in *Deathrealm*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Dead of Night* and many anthologies. A collection, *The Fall of the House of Escher* and *Other Illusions* has been published by Macabre, Inc (517 Massachusetts Av, Norfolk, VA 23508) His first novel, *This Is My Blood*, will soon be available from Transylvanis Press (PO Box 75012) A White Wolf Wraith novel will be available in January, a *Star Trek Voyager* novel in the spring, and a White Wolf Mage novel in the fall of '97.



# How Bad Do You Want It?

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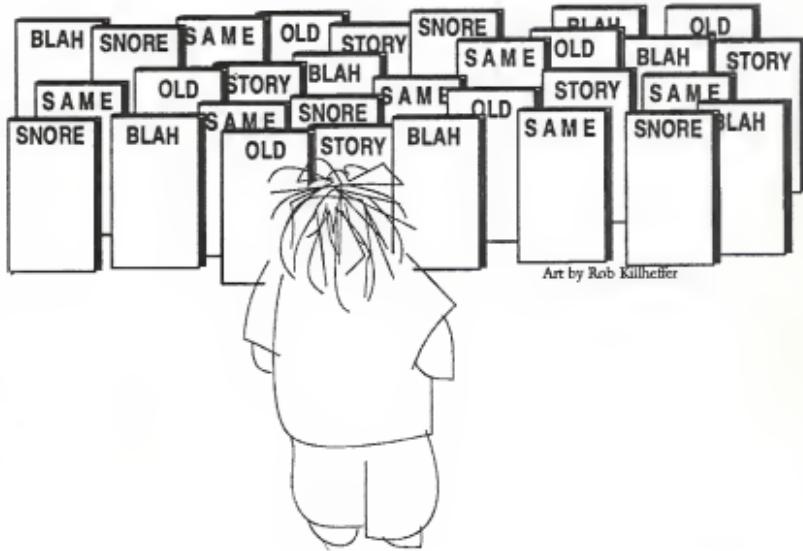
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# The New York Review of Science Fiction



Art by Rob Killheffer

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